

A PERFECT FOOL

BY FLORENCE WARDEN



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A PERFECT FOOL.

James, Mrs. Florence
Alice (Wife)

A PERFECT FOOL.

A Novel,

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

AUTHOR OF

"A WILD WOOING," "A WITCH OF THE HILLS,"

"THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," ETC.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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CHAPTER I

THE GREAT MAN OF A LITTLE TOWN.

"MY dear, the girl's a perfect fool. What her poor mother is going to do with her I don't know. As for teaching, I don't believe she knows anything herself. And as for getting married, why, I'm perfectly certain she doesn't know beef from mutton, and couldn't tell the difference between a cabbage and a cauliflower. I should be very sorry for the man who took Chris Abercarne for a wife!"

So spoke one of Chris Abercarne's mother's friends to another old lady, who was of exactly the same way of thinking, as a pretty girl, with dark-brown hair and merry dark blue eyes, passed the window of a dull house in a dull road in that part of Hammer-smith which calls itself West Kensington.

Indeed, matters had come to a serious point with Chris and her mother. The widow of an officer in the army, Mrs. Abercarne, having only the one child, had got on very comfortably for some years, until one of those periodical upheavals of "things in the city" had caused a sudden diminution of her small income, and brought the two ladies face to face with actual instead of conventional, poverty. Poor Mrs. Abercarne felt utterly helpless; and Chris, merry Chris.

who hitherto had had nothing to do but to laugh and keep her mother and her friends in good spirits, found with surprising suddenness that some aspects of life are no laughing matter.

At first there had been a vague tendency on the ladies' part to trust to the help of their rich and well-born relations. But this tendency was checked very early by the uncompromising tone of their relations' letters. It was clear that to get out of their difficulties they had no one but themselves to rely upon. Mrs. Abercarne was a hopeful woman, however, with an enormous belief in her own untried powers. She had an unacknowledged belief that nothing very dreadful ever did, or ever could, happen to the widow of a Colonel, who was also the granddaughter of an Admiral, and first cousin to the son of a Marquis. She would manage, so she said a hundred times, to pull herself and her "little daughter" through their difficulties.

Chris she had always treated as a baby, a very sweet and charming child, but a creature to be tenderly cared for and played with, not to be trusted or confided in. Mrs. Abercarne had old-fashioned notions about the bringing-up of girls, and she would have been reduced to her last crust before consenting to allow her daughter to leave her, except as a wife.

Now Chris, without daring openly to combat her mother's opinion that she was a mere baby, unfit by reason of her tender years to have a voice in any serious discussion, had her own views as to the wisdom of her adored mother's behaviour, over which she brooded in secret. She could not help feeling that she was by no means the helpless creature her mother and her mother's friends imagined, and she set

about devising plans whereby she might bring such wits as she possessed to their common aid.

To this end she used to buy *The Times*, and the other daily papers, and search their columns with a view to finding a rapid and easy way of making a fortune.

According to these same papers, nothing in the world was so simple. You had only to send fourteen stamps to somebody with an address in an obscure street, to learn the golden secret of "realising a competence without hindrance to present employment."

"As our present employment consists generally in sitting looking at the fire, with our hands clasped, wondering where the next quarter's rent is to come from," she remarked to her mother, who looked upon these exercises as trivial, "it wouldn't matter if we were hindered in it!"

Although Mrs. Abercarne felt convinced that the brilliant prospect was illusory, and the work offered would be something inconsistent with the dignity of a gentlewoman, she was always ready to supply the necessary fourteen stamps, and she waited with quite as much anxiety as her daughter for the answers they received to their applications. These answers were, unfortunately, nearly all of the same kind. The applicant for the fortune was to sell small and, for the most part, useless articles on commission among his or her friends.

"And you know, mamma," commented Chris, sorrowfully, as she looked at a pair of aluminium studs which had been sent in return for the latest fourteen stamps, "as our commission is only threepence on each pair, if we had forty thousand friends and each friend bought a pair of studs from us, that

would be only four hundred and ninety-eight pounds ten shillings ! I've worked it out, and that isn't what I should call a fortune, after all !”

Her mother sighed, and then said, rather petulantly, that she had known those advertisements were only nonsense, and she hoped she would not want to waste any more money in that way.

“No, mother,” said Chris gently.

And then the blood rushed up into her face, as her eye caught sight in the columns of the newspaper before her, of an advertisement of a different kind.

“If I only dared !” she thought as she threw a sly glance at her mother's worried face. But she did not dare, until presently she saw a tear drop suddenly on to her mother's dark dress.

In a moment Chris was on her knees. Her pretty, round young face was full of eagerness, as well as of sympathy, and in the touch of her arms, as they closed round her mother's neck, there was the clinging caress of one who entreats.

“Mother—mother !” whispered she breathlessly, “don't be angry—you mustn't. Only—only I have something to say—something you must see. Look here !” and she thrust the newspaper into Mrs. Abercarne's hands, and placed the lady's white fingers on a certain paragraph. “Read that !”

Drying her eyes hastily, ashamed to have been detected, Mrs. Abercarne did as she was asked to do. But the words she read conveyed no meaning to her, or, at least, she pretended they did not. But a slight tone of acerbity was noticeable in her voice as she answered ; and Chris knew that her mother understood.

“Well, my dear,” said the Colonel's widow, with

bland dignity, which she meant to denote unconsciousness, "I see nothing that can possibly interest you or me in the lines you have pointed out. Your finger must have slipped, I think."

"Read the lines aloud, mother dear," whispered Chris, caressing her mother's hand.

Still with the same imperfect assumption of extreme innocence, Mrs. Abercarne read by the light of the fire the following advertisement :

"WANTED, a thoroughly reliable and trustworthy woman, with daughter preferred, as house-keeper in a large establishment, where the owner is often away. Apply by letter only in the first instance, to J. B., Wyngnam House, Wyngnam-on-Sea."

"Well, my dear child," said Mrs. Abercarne, superbly, as she laid down the paper, "surely that is not what you wanted me to read?"

But Chris buried her head in her mother's shoulder.

"Yes, but it is, though," she whispered.

Of course, the elder lady had expected this; equally, of course, she had to affect the utmost amazement.

"And is it possible, my dear Christina," she murmured, gently, "that you can consider the words, 'a reliable and trustworthy woman,' applicable to me?"

But here, luckily for the girl, her sense of fun carried her away, and she laughed until she cried. Her tears, however, were not all of merriment.

"Why, certainly, mother," said she merrily. "I should be very indignant with any person who said they were not! Look here," she went on with sudden gravity, "what's the use of pretending any longer

that we can live on in the old way, when you know we can't? What's the use of keeping up this house, and having servants, whom we don't see how we shall be able to pay, when we dread every knock of the post-man, because it may be more bills? Mother—mother, do let us give it up. Don't let us play any longer at being anything but dreadfully poor. Let us face it, and make the best of it."

"What!" exclaimed the poor lady, whose pitiful pride, to do her justice, was much more concerned with her beautiful young daughter's position than with her own; "and be a housekeeper! Just an upper servant; and, perhaps, have this horrid man asking you to mend the tablecloths and count the clothes for the wash!"

"Well, mother, I shouldn't mind," said Chris laughing; "and it's too bad to call him a horrid man, when the worst thing the poor fellow has been guilty of, so far, is to advertise for a housekeeper for his 'large establishment.' Oh! mother, wouldn't you like to be at the head of a large establishment again, even if it were somebody else's!"

But Mrs. Abercarne shook her head. Her daughter's persuasions—perhaps the very novelty of her child's trying to persuade seriously at all—were taking their effect upon her; but it was an effect which produced in the poor gentlewoman the most acute shame and misery.

"What would Lord Llanfyllin say?" murmured she.

"What could he say except that it was a good deal better to keep somebody else's house, than to starve in one's own?" retorted Chris, brightly. "And as he's never seen me, or taken the slightest notice of you

since poor papa died, we really needn't trouble ourselves about him at all."

This was self-evident, but Mrs. Abercarne did not like to be reminded of the fact. Her cousin, by a remote cousinship, Lord Llanfyllin, had forgotten her very existence years ago ; but in the most sacred recesses of her heart he still sat enthroned, symbol of all that was greatest and noblest in the land and of her connection with it. She liked to think that her actions mattered to him ; and to be reminded of the fact that they did not, was eminently distasteful to her.

The postman, soon after this, came to the aid of Chris and her arguments by bringing the usual batch of worrying letters with bills and threats. With a burst of tears Mrs. Abercarne gave way, and with her daughter's soothing arms around her neck answered the loathsome advertisement with an eager hope in her heart that her letter would remain unnoticed by the advertiser.

Poor lady ! she was disappointed. Two days later she received an answer to her letter, written in the neat hand of a man of business, in the following words :

"DEAR MADAM,—Please state terms and approximate age of self and daughter ; also date when able to come.

"Yours faithfully,

"JOHN BRADFIELD."

Mrs. Abercarne felt stupefied, almost frightened.

"You said most likely he'd not even answer !" she said, reproachfully, to her daughter.

But Chris, who felt that the honour or the shame of this undertaking would devolve upon her, was full of excitement, and did not rest until she had hurried her mother into an answer intimating that they would be willing to become inmates of his house, and that Mrs. Abercarne would undertake the superintendence of his establishment for an honorarium of sixty pounds a year.

"As for telling him my age, Christina," went on the lady, haughtily, "that I certainly shall not do. I consider the request most impertinent, and it seems to me to prove conclusively that, however well off he may be, this Mr. John Bradfield is not a gentleman."

"Very well, mother; you needn't tell him your age; you can tell him mine. And then he can guess yours pretty nearly," she added, with a mischievous laugh. "It looks rather as if we thought we were doing him a great favour by condescending to accept his money and live comfortably in his house, doesn't it?" she said, when she had glanced through her mother's letter.

This was exactly Mrs. Abercarne's view of the transaction, and she was rather shocked to find that it was not also her daughter's. So she tried hard to impress upon Chris, who listened dutifully and without comment, that when two women of gentle birth and breeding took upon themselves such an appointment, they were indeed conferring upon the individual whose humble duty it was to maintain them in such a position an honour and a priceless boon.

Chris, who was beginning secretly to indulge in the luxury of opinions of her own, grew rather anxious lest her mother's peculiarities of style should frighten

Mr. John Bradfield, and induce him to bestow the "appointment" in question upon some mother and daughter less well-born, perhaps, but at the same time less graciously condescending and more accommodating. She watched eagerly for the postman for the next few days, and when another letter did arrive in the neat, business-like hand, her fingers trembled as she ran with it to her mother. Then Chris noticed that Mrs. Abercarne, while still careful to affect the haughtiest indifference, was really as anxious as she as to the contents of the letter. Indeed, the poor lady had more debts and more difficulties than she let her child know anything about, and she was by this time wondering what would become of them if Mr. Bradfield should decide not to avail himself of her condescending offer.

This was the letter :

"DEAR MADAM,—Leave Charing Cross to-morrow (Thursday), at 3.30 you will reach Wyngham at 6.5 (if you don't get into the wrong train when you change at Abbey Marsh), and you will find a conveyance at the station to bring you to the house.—Yours faithfully.

"JOHN BRADFIELD."

Mrs. Abercarne drew a long breath

"To-morrow!" she gasped. "Oh, Chris! we must give the whole thing up. The man is evidently quite mad. I shouldn't wonder if the place were to turn out to be a private lunatic asylum. To-morrow!"

And the poor lady, bitterly disappointed, although she would not own it, fell to laughing hysterically

Chris threw her arms round her neck ; she did not mean the project to fall through now.

"Why not to-morrow, as well as any other day, mother, and get it over?" suggested she. "He isn't mad, I expect. Only eccentric. You know that people who live in the country always grow eccentric and very self-willed. Don't give up until you have seen what he is like."

To the girl's mind nothing could be more enchanting than the prospect of missing the round of farewell visits, the half-sincere condolences of her mother's large circle of friends, the dread of facing whom had been haunting her ; and in the end Chris had her way, and by a mighty effort everything was packed that night, except a few necessities which Chris herself unmethodically rammed into the trunks on the following morning, while Mrs. Abercarne made a rapid circuit of such friends as lived near, that she might not quite miss the ceremony and the sympathy of a formal leave-taking.

Mrs. Abercarne had scarcely recovered the breath which Mr. Bradfield's last letter had taken away, when the train, on a cold but fine November evening, arrived at Wyngnam station.

There were few people on the platform, but there was a footman evidently looking out for some one, and Chris suggested that it must be for them, and her guess was correct. The man got their luggage out, under the supervision of Mrs. Abercarne, and as the lady had thought proper to bring a great many more trunks than she really wanted in order to give a sense of her dignity and importance, this was a work of time.

Meanwhile Chris, by her mother's direction, stood

back a little, and to be under her mother's eye, waited. She was stiff and cold, and she stood first on one leg, and then on the other, weary and impatient at her mother's lengthy proceedings.

"You can sit down on that bench if you're tired. There's no extra charge," said a harsh voice, ironically, close to her ear.

She turned quickly, and saw a man rather under than over the middle height, of spare figure, and hard-featured face, who was standing by the book-stall, turning over the leaves of a Christmas number. He wore a long frieze overcoat, which enveloped him from his chin to his heels, and a little cap to match, which hid his eyes.

Little as she could see of him, Chris instantly jumped to the conclusion that this was Mr. Bradfield himself.

"He wouldn't order me about like that if he were not," she said to herself. And she felt rather frightened, wondering how her mother would receive this style of address, and picturing to herself the "awful row" there would be between the two at or very soon after their very first interview.

She said "Thank you," rather timidly, and took the suggestion offered, rather to prevent further conversation than because she wished to rest. When her mother had finished with the luggage, Chris ran towards her, to check any verbal indiscretion of the kind she had been indulging in on the way down, concerning the supposed unpleasant idiosyncrasies of the master of Wyngham House.

But she was too late.

"Very bucolic domestics this gentleman seems to have. Let us hope we shall not see their cha-

racteristics repeated in the master," said Mrs. Abercarne, in a voice loud enough for the man at the bookstall to hear, as she and her daughter met.

The man in the frieze overcoat turned round, and regarded the speaker with an amused stare, which that lady chose to consider very offensive. She turned her back upon him sharply, therefore, as she went on speaking to Chris, who looked frightened. The man in the frieze coat walked away.

"What extremely bad manners these rustics have!" exclaimed Mrs. Abercarne, before he was well out of hearing.

"Sh-sh, mamma! We don't know who he is," said Chris, in a terror-struck whisper.

Mrs. Abercarne was going to retort rather sharply, when a thought, a suspicion, perhaps the same that had alarmed her daughter, made her pause, and turn abruptly to the porter who was standing behind her.

"Who is that man?" she asked, quickly.

"Which man, ma'am?"

"The man in the long coat; the man who was standing at the bookstall."

The porter stared at her. He seemed to think she must be joking to make such an inquiry, and in such a tone.

"The gentleman who has just gone out, ma'am?" ejaculated he, repeating her words with a difference; "why, that gentleman is Mr. Bradfield of the big house!"

And he made the announcement in the tone of one who rebukes a blasphemer.

CHAPTER II.

THE GREAT MAN'S HOUSE.

POOR Mrs. Abercarne tried to look as if she didn't mind, but the attempt was a failure. It was with uneasy hearts and troubled countenances that both she and her daughter went through the station and got into the comfortable carriage which was waiting for them outside.

Then, when they were well on their way, Chris rashly tried to comfort her.

"Never mind, mother," whispered she, tucking her hand lovingly under her mother's arm, and speaking in a bright voice which expressed more cheerfulness than she felt. "Perhaps he didn't hear. And, after all, you didn't say anything so very dreadful, did you?" she added, trying to ignore those awful last words about the bad manners of rustics. "I daresay he knows himself that his footman looks rather round-faced and rosy."

"Indeed, Chris, it matters very little to me whether he heard or not," answered Mrs. Abercarne, quickly "These people must expect to hear the truth of themselves sometimes; and it cannot possibly affect us, for, as you know, we have only come here, as one may say, for the fun of the thing, and nothing would induce us to stay here permanently in the house of such a barbaric person as you can see for yourself this Mr. Bradfield is."

And Mrs. Abercarne, having run herself quite out

of breath in her haste to persuade Chris that her conduct had been singularly discreet and full of tact, sat back and looked out of the carriage window at the sea.

Chris had the wisdom to murmur, "Yes, mamma," and then to say nothing more except a few comments on the street through which they were passing. She was dreading the reception they would meet with at the hands of the justly-offended owner of Wyngham House. For the first time she realised the disagreeable nature of their position, the fact that they came, not as visitors, but as hired dependents on the good pleasure of a stranger, who could, if he chose, even send them about their business with the curt intimation that their services would not be wanted.

To dispel these gloomy thoughts, or, at least, to prevent her mother from guessing what troubled her, Chris looked about her as they drove along.

She saw, in the first place, that Wyngham was a garrison town, for the red coats of soldiers made pleasant spots of colour in the straight, narrow old street. This street changed gradually in character, until the shops and inns gave place to houses of a more or less modern type; and, at last, these dwellings came to an abrupt end on one side of the road, and there was nothing but a strip of waste land, and a strip beyond that of sharply shelving beach, between them and the sea.

Chris, straining her eyes in the darkness, could see lights twinkling on the ships as they passed, and she gave a cry of delight. She had lived near the sea at one time, for Mrs. Abercarne had had a house at Southsea in her more prosperous days. But it was

some years since that bright period was over, and Chris had grown reconciled to the fogs of London since then. The sight, and the smell of the sea filled her with vivid sensations of pleasure. She remembered the bright sun and the breezy walks, and her heart seemed to rise at a bound, only to sink the next moment with the despairing thought that her mother had made their stay in this delightful place impossible.

The same thought may have crossed her mother's mind also, for Mrs. Abercarne made no comment on her daughter's exclamations of pleasure, but sat in silence for the rest of the drive.

Wyngnam House was a little way out of the town, and was so close to the sea, that the ocean looked, as Chris afterwards expressed it, like a lake in the grounds. It was approached from the inland side by a short carriage drive, and was surrounded by grounds of some natural beauty, but of no great pretension. The house, which was built in the Italian style, and painted white, was large and rather pretty. It was approached by a porch in which, as the carriage drove up, a man-servant, in livery, was waiting to receive the new arrivals. Chris peeped about anxiously for the master of the house, and even Mrs. Abercarne betrayed to her daughter's eyes certain signs of nervous apprehension. But there was no one to be seen except the respectful and stolid-looking butler, and a neat housemaid, who was waiting inside the entrance hall to show them upstairs.

"You would like to go straight up to your rooms, ma'am, would you not?" asked the maid, smiling. "There is a fire in the drawing-room, but it's only just been lit, and it's rather cold in there."

Mrs. Abercarne answered that they should like to go to their rooms; and she spoke very graciously, being mollified by the civility of their reception. For the butler had even delivered his master's apologies for not receiving them in person, pleading a business appointment. The sharp eyes of Chris, however, detected that a door on the left, just inside the inner hall, was ajar, and that a hand, wearing a signet ring, which she recognised as Mr. Bradfield's, was visible between the door-post and the door. This fact depressed her. Surely, if Mr. Bradfield had overlooked her mother's indiscretion, he would, instead of spying upon their entrance, have come out and welcomed them himself. She felt sure that before the evening was over there would be a scene which would result in their leaving the place. And this thought, which had caused her a little distress before, caused her a great deal more now.

For Chris perceived, as soon as she stepped inside the house, that she was in a sort of fairy palace, the like of which she had never seen before. Both halls were hung with rich tapestries, whether old or new she did not know, but the effect of which was of luxury, beauty, and romance, which fired her young imagination while it charmed her eyes. From the ceiling hung lamps of various patterns, from the many-coloured Chinese lantern, with its pictures and hanging strings of beads, to the graceful modern Italian lamp of shining silver, with its flying cupids and richly-ornamented chains. Over a beautiful carved marble fireplace hung a priceless picture, a genuine Murillo, the dark colours of which stood out in sombre relief against its massive gilt frame. On each side beautiful and interesting objects claimed

the attention of the new-comers. Chris, younger and more impressionable than her mother, lingered behind, and cast admiring looks at Florentine cabinets, rare old china vases, and trophies of ancient armour, which were among the beautiful and curious things with which the inner hall was stored.

Turning to the left they came to the staircase, the balustrade of which was so elaborately carved as to be magnificent to the eye, and particularly uncomfortable to the hand.

"That's the study," whispered the housemaid, as she led them past a door on the left, up the first short flight of stairs.

And from the respectful glance and the lowered tone Chris guessed that the master of the house passed most of his time in that apartment, and also that he was held in some awe by his servants.

They passed on, up a second flight of stairs, to the right, noticing as they went a dazzling collection of curious and interesting objects, old hanging clocks and cupboards, rare Oriental plates and bowls, weapons, helmets, and ancient shields. As they proceeded up the second flight of stairs they found themselves surrounded on all sides by pictures, old and new, paintings in oils and drawings in water-colour, with which the walls were so well covered that scarcely a glimpse could be caught of the dark red distemper which was the background to the gilt frames.

At the top of the stairs they came to a corridor which ran the whole length of the main body of the house; and this was a veritable museum of beautiful and curious cabinets, high-backed chairs, the seats of which were covered with ancient tapestry, Dresden clocks, models of Indian temples, canoes, and of

curiosities so many and so various that Chris grew confused and walked as if in a dream with only one conscious thought—the fear of falling against some precious rarity, and drawing upon herself eternal disgrace and confusion.

Mrs. Abercarne being, although she would not betray the fact, full of nervous apprehension, as well as of vexation at her altered and degraded position, saw less than her daughter did; but even she, with her additional disadvantage of being short-sighted, began to be aware that her surroundings were of a very exceptional kind.

“Dear me,” she exclaimed, stopping short and raising the gold double eye-glass she carried, as a beautiful porcelain vase caught her eye. “Why, that must be Dresden, old Dresden. Your master has very excellent taste. There are some beautiful things here. It’s quite a museum!”

She spoke in a patronising manner to the maid, glad of an opportunity to show what a very superior person she was. For a taste for old china does not come by nature.

But the housemaid was a superior person also.

“Oh, yes,” she answered with surprise. “Don’t you know that Mr. Bradfield’s collection is famous, and that people write and ask him to see it, quite as if he was royalty! We’ve had a Duke here, looking at those very things, and wishing they were his, and saying so!”

And the maid smiled with a sense of her own share in the glory that the Duke’s visit had cast upon the establishment.

They went the whole length of the corridor, and were shown into a bedroom on the right, the window

of which looked inland. It was rather a small room, this fact being emphasised by the quantity of handsome and costly furniture with which it was filled. Before a carved white stone fireplace, fitted with pretty tiles, another housemaid was kneeling. She started up when the ladies came in.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said she; "the fire will draw up directly, and the room will soon be warm. It was only ten minutes ago master told me you were to have this room, instead of the one in the wing."

Chris caught a frown from the other housemaid, intimating that this information was not wanted. Then the second housemaid having said she would bring them some hot water, the ladies were left to themselves.

Chris, tired as she was, spent the next ten minutes alternately in an ecstasy of high spirits, and a fit of deep depression; the former the result of her delight in her surroundings, the latter the effect of her belief that she would soon have to leave them.

"I wonder why he ordered our room to be changed?" she whispered to her mother, as she admired in turn the handsome brass bedstead, with its spread of silk and lace, the rosewood furniture, the little lady's writing-table, the cosy sofa and easy-chair. "Have we been sent up or sent down? If we have been sent up, the bedroom in the wing must have been gorgeous indeed. Mother, this bed is too magnificent to sleep in; and as for the so-called dressing-room next door," and she peeped through a door which communicated with a second and rather smaller room, "it is a cross between a museum and a palatial *poudoir*."

Mrs. Abercarne, of course, took these marvels more quietly. She understood quite well that she was in an exceptionally beautiful and well-fitted house ; but she did not care to acknowledge that it was anything out of the common to her. The ingenuous delight of Chris, therefore, rather annoyed her, so that at last the girl had to become apologetic.

"You know, mother," she whispered humbly, "I have never seen anything so beautiful in all my life as this place and I can't help noticing it. You see, you were well-off once, and used to beautiful houses. But you know that to me everything seems new and wonderful."

And Mrs. Abercarne repented of her petulant rebuke, remembering, with tears in her eyes, that Chris had had indeed very little experience of luxury.

They had been told that dinner would be ready in a few minutes, so Chris opened the door a little way, waiting for a further announcement to be made to them. At the opposite side of the corridor, and a little nearer than their door to the very end of it, a maidservant was coming in and out of another door. A few steps further down the maid was met by the footman with a tray. He began to express his feelings in tones which reached the ears of Chris.

"Well, this is a rum start!" he said confidentially to the housemaid as he passed her. "Everything was ready for two in the housekeeper's room ; but now it seems that the basement isn't good enough, and we're to dine upstairs like the quality."

"Hold your tongue," whispered the girl, laughing. "Be a good boy, and you will see what you will see."

And she tripped past him, and left him to go on his way along the corridor.

Chris did not repeat to her mother the scrap of conversation she had overheard ; but it increased her own feelings of curiosity and bewilderment.

"Do you think Mr. Bradfield will dine with us, mother?" she asked, as she softly closed the door.

The words were hardly out of her mouth when there was a knock at the door, and the footman announced that dinner was ready for them in the Chinese-room. The two ladies were then shown into an apartment so pretty that Chris felt constrained to keep her eyes down, in deference to her mother's wishes, lest her unseemly delight should be noticed by the servants.

It was indeed a most beautiful room which they now entered. Windows on two sides were at this time covered by the drawn curtains, and these, of dark blue silk, richly embroidered with conventional Chinese figures, gave a striking character to the apartment. The walls were lined with bookcases well filled with books, while in the corner, close to a fireplace beautifully decorated in the modern style, a piano stood temptingly open. A cabinet entirely full of Chinese models and toys carved in ivory filled the remaining space against the walls, while under one window stood a long writing-table, and under the other two low-seated easy-chairs. In the middle of the room a small table had been laid for dinner for two persons ; and this again excited the admiration of Chris by the quaint beauty of the old silver, and the magnificence of the Crown Derby dinner-service.

The room was lighted entirely by wax candles, in massive silver candlesticks, and this luxurious light completed the charm which her surroundings had

thrown over Chris. The girl had been hungry on her first arrival, but she now found herself too much excited to eat. She felt that in this house of marvels something must surely be going to happen, and each time the door opened she glanced towards it with eager eyes.

When at last the crowning charm of the meal had arrived in the shape of dessert, served on the daintiest of Sèvres china, and the footman had left them to themselves, Chris drew a long breath.

"Mamma!" she said, in a voice in which girlish merriment struggled with a little real awe, "this is too much. It is so mysterious that it frightens me. All this magnificence just for the housekeeper and her daughter! Everything served in the most gorgeous manner, and no master to be seen. Why, it's just like Beauty and the Beast!"

A short laugh frightened her so much that she started up from her chair. Mr. Bradfield, in a rough shooting-suit, stood just inside the room.

"That's it, Miss Abernethy, or Miss Apricot, or whatever your name is," said he grimly. "And I'm the Beast."

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT MAN'S SMILE

CHRIS had jumped up from her chair in an uncontrollable impulse of terror at the sound of Mr. Bradfield's voice, although he spoke in tones which betrayed more amusement than annoyance. She looked so much alarmed that even her mother smiled, while the great man himself nearly laughed outright.

"Ah—ha!" said he, shaking his head in pretended menace. "You did not think you would so soon hear him roar, did you?"

Chris, still white, and with tears starting to her eyes, stammered some sort of incoherent apology. Mrs. Abercarne, pitying the poor child, who was indeed most miserable at this fresh mishap, addressed the dreaded employer in a stately and dignified fashion.

"You must forgive my daughter, sir," she began, with a great affectation of deference. Indeed, her humility was so deep, so laboured in expression, as to constitute almost an offence, implying as it did that her natural position was so lofty, that it required a good deal of make-believe to bring herself into a semblance of inferiority to him. "She had no intention of offending you, I can assure you. Her words were merely idle ones, uttered in girlish folly, and without the slightest idea that you were near enough to overhear them."

Mrs. Abercarne slightly emphasised these last words, just to remind him that in approaching

without warning he had committed a breach of what she considered good form.

So far from appearing to be impressed by the gentle rebuke, Mr. Bradfield proceeded to offend more deeply. Merely nodding to the elderly lady, without the formality of a glance in her direction, he kept his eyes fixed upon Chris as he took a step forward, which brought him into the corner by the piano, and in front of the fireplace. Here he stood for a few moments in perfect silence, still looking at the young girl, and rubbing his hands softly, the one over the other, in the warmth of the fire. Chris, who, instead of being pale, was now crimson, looked at the carpet and remained standing, wishing she had never persuaded her mother to take this degrading position, and feeling acutely that if they had come as visitors, and not as dependents, Mr. Bradfield would never have dared to stare at her in this persistent and insulting manner.

Mrs. Abercarne, older and more self-possessed, was able to get a good view of the man on whom so much now depended, and to form some sort of opinion as to their chances of staying in this luxurious home.

Mr. Bradfield was not handsome, neither was he of very distinguished appearance. A little below the middle height, neither stout nor thin, there was nothing more striking about him than his very black whiskers, moustache and eyebrows, and a certain steady stare of his sharp grey eyes, which was rather disconcerting, since it gave the idea that he was always inwardly taking stock of the person on whom his eyes were fixed.

"Girlish folly?" he repeated at last. "Do you plead guilty to that, Miss—Miss——" Here he

paused, hunted in his pockets, and producing Mrs. Abercarne's letter, turned to the signature. "Miss Abercarne. You must excuse me, but I have had a good deal of correspondence the last few days, and I haven't taken proper note of your name. Now," he went on, still ignoring the elderly lady altogether, "do you still plead guilty to girlish folly, Miss Abercarne?"

"Yes," murmured Chris, "and I am very sorry."

"Not at all, not at all. You were quite right. I am a beast, and you—well, you know best whether the other title applies to you."

"My daughter would be the last person to think so," broke in Mrs. Abercarne, with just enough emphasis to show that it was to herself that he ought to be addressing his conversation; "she would no more think of calling herself a beauty, than she would of—of——"

"Calling me a beast?" added Mr. Bradfield, turning upon her so quickly that she drew her breath sharply, as if she had been frightened. "Well, and where would be the harm, when her mother set her the example? Oh, you can't deny it. What was it I heard you say about me at the station? That I was more of a rustic than my own servants, and that my manners were—I forget what; but *you* remember, I daresay. Perhaps you will be kind enough to repeat your criticism now that we are both calm, and I will try and profit by it."

It was Mrs. Abercarne's turn to be out of countenance, and her daughter's to glance at her in some amusement. For Chris saw by Mr. Bradfield's manner that she and her mother would not have to suffer for their verbal indiscretions.

"You must have misunderstood what I said," said Mrs. Abercarne, regaining her composure again very quickly, and speaking with a bland dignity which made contradiction almost an impossibility.

But Mr. Bradfield was a man used to performing impossibilities, and he laughed in her face.

"Not a bit of it," said he shortly. "It was the truth of your observation that made it so striking. I *am* a rustic, and as bucolic-looking as my servants. There's just the hope, of course, that the influence of your own grand manners may have a good effect upon mine."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Abercarne, with spirit, "I should have thought, sir, that if you believe us capable of so much rudeness you would scarcely wish us, or rather wish me," she corrected, "to enter your—your—your service."

She got the obnoxious word out at last, with the same deliberate emphasis that she had used on the word "sir." Mr. Bradfield evidently got impatient.

"I told you I didn't mind," he said, shortly. "What does it matter what you please to think of me or my manners? If you had thought my looks or my manners so important you would have made inquiries about them before coming, wouldn't you? You would have written: 'Dear Sir,—Please send reference as to your appearance and general behaviour.' As you didn't write me like that, I take it for granted you did not care what my manners were, any more than I cared about yours. I take it that our coming together was a matter of mutual convenience, and that as long as we don't get in each other's way we need trouble ourselves no more about each other's personality than if we were in separate hemispheres.

Well, then, I can promise you at least that I won't get in your way any more than I can help."

Mr. Bradfield delivered this speech with his back to the fire and his hands clasped behind him. From time to time, as he spoke, he cast furtive glances at Chris, but he did not look once at the lady he was addressing. Mrs. Abercarne, however made up her mind to put up with his peculiarities, so she uttered a curious little sound, which passed by courtesy for a laugh of appreciation of his humour, and graciously expressed her own gratitude and her daughter's for his kind reception of them.

"My only fear is that you are spoiling us by treating us too well, sir," she concluded.

Again she rolled out the "sir" in the manner of a duchess conversing with a prince. Mr. Bradfield winced perceptibly.

"You needn't say 'sir' if you don't like it," said he, drily. "It doesn't seem to agree with you. Glad you're pleased. You can have this room to yourselves if you like; I don't use it much. And anything you want let me know of it at once. You needn't come to me," he continued, quickly, "but just send word. I want you to be comfortable, very comfortable. Perkins will give you the keys and all that. And—and I hope you'll be happy here."

Again he glanced at the girl as he walked rapidly to the door, nodded "good-night," and went out.

For a few moments after they were left alone together neither mother nor daughter uttered a single word. They glanced at the door as if determined not to commit further indiscretions by hazarding any comment on Mr. Bradfield, until he had had time to take himself to the remotest part of the house. At

last, when each had well considered the countenance of the other, Mrs. Abercarne spoke.

"A very kindly, hospitable man, and very forgiving, too; don't you think so, my dear?" were her first words.

Chris stared at her mother, and then at the door. Surely Mrs. Abercarne must have an idea that she could be overheard, or she would never perjure herself in this fashion. The elder lady went smoothly on, without appearing to notice her daughter's hesitation in answering.

"A little brusque, a little unpolished, perhaps, but a thoroughly honest fellow, without hypocrisy and without affectation. The sort of man one instinctively feels that one can trust."

And Mrs. Abercarne crossed the room to the fire-side, and settled herself comfortably in an easy chair, with her feet on the fender-stool.

Then Chris, perceiving that there was some occult meaning in all this, replied discreetly:

"I am glad you think so well of him, mother. But I—I shouldn't have thought he was the kind of man you would have taken such a fancy to."

"Ah, my dear, you girls always judge by the exterior," exclaimed Mrs. Abercarne, as she took up her knitting, and began counting the stitches. "But I should have thought **that** at any rate Mr. Bradfield's talk would have amused you."

"Why, so it did, mother."

Chris had grown very quiet, and was pondering the situation. She began to have a faint suspicion of the direction whither these remarks were tending, and some words which presently fell from her mother's lips confirmed it.

"I wonder, Chris," she said softly, running her fingers gently up and down one of the steel knitting-pins, "whether Mr. Bradfield is a bachelor, or a widower, or what?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, mother," answered the young girl demurely.

Then there was silence for a short space, and when Mrs. Abercarne spoke again it was about something else. By tacit agreement the master of the house was not mentioned again by either of the ladies until they had retired to rest.

Then Mrs. Abercarne heard a voice calling softly, "Mother!" and she perceived by the light of the fire a pair of very wide-awake eyes on the pillow beside hers.

"Yes, dear?"

"Why do people always think that honesty must go with rough manners?"

Mrs. Abercarne could not answer her. So she affected to laugh at the words as if they were a jest. But presently she asked in a rather tentative tone:

"Don't you like Mr. Bradfield then?"

And the answer came very decidedly indeed:

"No, mother, I don't like him at all."

CHAPTER IV.

THE GREAT MAN FROWNS.

THE next morning Chris was awakened by a stream of bright light coming between the window-curtains and when she looked out of the window, she gave a scream of delight.

"Oh! mother — mother, this can't be really November, or we can't be really in foggy England!" she cried in an ecstasy, as she drank in, with greedy eyes, all the loveliness of fresh green grass, and the varied tints of trees in autumn.

Their bed-room was at the front of the house, and looked inland over the flower-garden and the park. The beauty of the place became still more striking to their London eyes, when they went into the Chinese-room, and saw the view southwards over the sea, and westwards along the country road to little Wyngam, a mile away.

But while Chris was chiefly occupied with the outlook from the windows, Mrs. Abercarne's attention was directed to the interior of the house, and she made some discoveries in the broad daylight which the gracious glamour of candles had concealed from her. Curious lapses of knowledge or taste now betrayed themselves. She perceived a valuable oil-painting hanging on the wall between a chromo and an oleograph. A rare edition of Shakespeare stood in the bookcase, side by side with one which was cheap,

worthless and modern. In china the collector's lack of taste was still more evident ; old and new, good and bad, were treated on equal terms.

She made no comment aloud, however, having, after the experience of the previous evening, a discreet fear of being mysteriously overheard.

When they had breakfasted, the head housemaid came up with a message from Mr. Bradfield, to the effect that he hoped they would begin the day by inspecting the house, and particularly his "collection."

"We shall be delighted," said Mrs. Abercarne: "and where is the special collection Mr. Bradfield wishes us to see?"

"It isn't anywhere specially," answered the woman, a gloomy-eyed and severe person, who had lived "in noblemen's families," and felt her own condescension in occupying her present situation most deeply. "The things are all over the place. There are no galleries."

"A charming arrangement," murmured Mrs. Abercarne. "So much better than the usual formal disposal of art treasures, as if in a museum."

So they made the tour of the mansion, which was a singularly ill-arranged building, in the style of a rabbit-warren, full of nooks which were not cosy, and of corners which were well adapted for nothing except dust. Solemnly they passed down the corridor, the gloomy-eyed housemaid giving them as they went a catalogue-like description of the various "objects of interest" as they passed them.

"Model of an ironclad fitted with turret guns, torpedo-catcher, and all the latest improvements. Specimen of pottery taken from an ancient Egyptian tomb. Inlaid cabinet, bought by Mr. Bradfield from a Florentine palace," chanted the housemaid.

"Beautiful! What a charming design! How very interesting, Chris!" murmured Mrs. Abercarne.

But Chris, whose taste was raw and undeveloped, was paying small attention to ancient pottery and torpedo-catchers. Her attention had been attracted by something which seemed to her to promise more human interest than paintings or old china. The corridor in which they were ran straight through the house, past the head of the front and of the back staircases, into a wing which had been added to the east sea-front. From behind one of the doors in this wing strange noises began to reach the ears of Chris, who presently noticed that the housemaid, while still monotonously chanting her description, glanced alternately at the door in question, and at Chris herself, as if wondering what the young lady thought of the unusual sounds.

It was not until they had passed the head of the principal staircase, by which time the noise had grown louder and more continuous, that Mrs. Abercarne's attention was also attracted. An unearthly groan made her start and turn to the housemaid, who, taking no apparent notice, proceeded to lead the way downstairs.

"What's that?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercarne, as she glanced nervously at the door from behind which the noises came. At the same moment the door was shaken violently, and there was a loud crash as if some heavy body had been thrown against it.

"And this," went on the housemaid calmly, pointing to a picture over her head, "is one of Sir Edwin Landseer's, while the one on your left is the portrait of a lady by Sir Thomas Lawrence."

"Oh, indeed!" murmured Mrs. Abercarne, in a rather less enthusiastic voice than before.

They went on through the inner hall, the dining-room, two magnificent drawing-rooms, and a wretched little library, for the smallness of which the housemaid gloomily apologised.

"Mr. Bradfield's books, like the rest of the things, were scattered in all directions about the house," she said.

But Mrs. Abercarne was no longer charmed by this arrangement. The poor lady was really alarmed, and even the imposing proportions of the drawing-room, and the display of magnificent old plate in the dining-room, failed to rekindle her admiration. They visited the basement, where the cook and the rest of the household were formally presented to her, and then she herself cut short the inspection and returned upstairs. She lingered, as Chris and the housemaid behind her were forced to linger too, on the staircase. They were opposite a door which the housemaid had not opened; it was Mr. Bradfield's study, she said. Just as Mrs. Abercarne was about to ask a question about the strange noises, the door from which they had issued was opened quickly, and a man-servant, out of livery, who looked heated, disordered and breathless, ran out and locked it quickly behind him.

In answer to an enquiry not spoken, but looked by the housemaid, the man said, briefly:

"It's all right. He's quiet now," and disappeared quickly down the back staircase.

Mrs. Abercarne drew a long breath which sounded almost like a stifled scream; Chris looked fixedly at the locked door.

"What door is that?" she asked.

The housemaid, after hesitating a moment, and glancing towards the door of the study, answered in a low voice :

"Those are Mr. Richard's rooms."

"And who is Mr. Richard?" asked Mrs. Abercarne.

The woman did not immediately answer. During the short pause which succeeded the lady's question, the study door was opened suddenly, and Mr. Bradfield came out, looking very angry.

"Now, haven't I told you not to make a mystery about Mr. Richard?" said he sharply to the housemaid. "What do you mean by frightening these poor ladies out of their wits with your mysterious nods and winks? You and Stelfox, the pair of you? Why can't you answer a simple question straightforwardly, and have done with it?"

The housemaid remained silent, and looked down on the floor.

"I thought, sir — I thought, perhaps, the ladies might be alarmed——" she began.

"Alarmed!" echoed Mr. Bradfield impatiently. "And who knows it better than yourself that there is nothing to be alarmed about?" Dismissing the woman with a wave of the hand, he turned to the ladies. "It is only a poor young lad, the son of an old clerk of mine. He is not quite as bright as he might be, poor fellow! but I can't bear to send him to a home or an asylum, or anything of that sort. I should never feel sure how they were treating him. But he is harmless, I assure you. Perfectly, entirely harmless."

Mrs. Abercarne professed herself completely satisfied with this explanation, and affected, out of

courtesy, to applaud Mr. Bradfield's humanity in keeping him under his own roof. But when she and her daughter were alone again, safe in their own room, the elderly lady turned the key hastily, and confided her fears to her daughter in a tremulous whisper.

"It's all very well for Mr. Bradfield to say this lunatic's harmless," she said, close to her daughter's ear, "but I don't believe it. If he were harmless, why should he be kept in rooms by himself, and be locked in? No, Chris; depend upon it, he's a dangerous lunatic, and that man who rushed out is his keeper. He had been struggling with him; we heard him. And I don't intend to remain under the same roof with a raving madman for another night."

CHAPTER V.

MASTER AND MAN.

To have a raving lunatic under the same roof with you is an experience which appeals differently to different minds. To the middle-aged it is a fact calculated to send a "cold shiver down the back," while to the very young it suggests untold possibilities of danger and excitement.

It is not surprising, therefore, that while Mrs. Abercarne made up her mind to go as soon as she heard of the existence of Mr. Richard, to Chris this was only another inducement to stay. It was a hard matter, however, to bring her mother to her way of thinking; and when Mrs. Abercarne insisted on replacing in her trunks the things which she had begun

to unpack, the young girl almost gave up hoping to change her determination.

"Now I shall go downstairs and knock at the door of the study, and explain to Mr. Bradfield how impossible it is that we should remain here under the circumstances," said the elder lady decidedly, as she straightened the lace she wore round her neck, preparatory to making an imposing entrance into her employer's presence.

"But, mother, you told him just now that you were not a bit frightened, and he will think you are very changeable to have altered your mind so soon."

"I have had time to think it over," explained her mother, rather weakly. "One does not see everything in the first minute. And it is not for myself I care. But a young girl like you must not be exposed to the vagaries of a madman, nor live in a house that is talked about."

Chris was silent. Against those mysterious conventions which bound her mother down more tightly than prison walls, she knew that all her arguments, all her persuasions, would be powerless. With sorrowful eyes she watched her mother finish repacking, shut down the lid of the last portmanteau, and leave the room with the firm steps of a woman who had finally and firmly made up her mind.

Then Chris went into the beautiful Chinese-room, and looked lovingly round the walls, and longingly out of the window. She had never been inside a house half so nice as this, she thought, and she had not yet got over the first ecstasy of joy on finding what a beautiful place they were to have for a home. Now they would have to go back to London, she supposed; and as their own house had been given up,

and the furniture sold, they would have to take cheap and dreary lodgings until they could find some other engagement. And when would they be so lucky as to find another together?

Chris was not more inclined to tears than other girls of her age, but the weight of the woes upon her gradually grew too heavy to be borne without some outward demonstration. So that, when at last the door opened to admit, as she supposed, her mother, Chris was curled up in one of the low arm-chairs by the window and could not for shame exhibit her tear-stained face.

"Oh, mother," she sobbed, without looking up, "how can you have the heart to leave this lovely place to go back to that hateful London? We should have been so happy here; I'm sure we should!"

"There!" exclaimed a man's gruff voice loudly, and Mr. Bradfield, for he was the intruder, burst into a loud, ironical laugh.

Chris sprang up and dried her eyes hastily, overwhelmed with confusion.

Her mother, not so fleet of foot as the man, was only just entering the room. Her face wore an expression of great vexation.

"There!" repeated Mr. Bradfield, as soon as he could speak. "Did you hear that, madam? You should have coached your daughter up better. You come and tell me that you would be glad to stay in my house, but that your daughter is so much frightened that she insists on leaving immediately; and I come up here, take the young lady unawares, and hear her beg not to be taken away! How do you reconcile the two things, Mrs. Abercarne? Answer me that, madam.

Even Mrs. Abercarne had no answer ready. Chris came to her mother's rescue.

"My mother is quite right," she said. "I should not care to stay here, although it is such a beautiful place, now that I know there is a person shut up here. I should always be afraid of his getting out."

Mr. Bradfield stamped his foot impatiently. Since he had been a rich man he had been used to finding a way out of every difficulty, a way to indulge every whim.

"I have told you both that there is no danger; that this unfortunate young man is absolutely harmless and inoffensive. You shall hear what his attendant says."

Mr. Bradfield rang the bell sharply, and told the servant, who quickly appeared at the summons, to send Stelfox to him. In the meantime, without any further remarks either to mother or daughter, he strode up and down the room with his hands behind him, and his eyes on the carpet.

In a few minutes there was a knock at the door, and the man who had told the housemaid that Mr. Richard "was quiet now" came in.

Jim Stelfox was a man about forty-five years of age, rather above the medium height, with an open, honest, and withal resolute-looking face, and a straightforward look of the eyes which spoke of obstinacy as well as honesty. His hair, which was still thick, was iron-grey; so were his trim whiskers. His eyes were grey also, hard and keen; his mouth was straight, and shut very firmly.

He waited, with his eyes fixed upon his master, respectfully, to be interrogated.

"How many years have you been in my employment, Stelfox?" asked Mr. Bradfield

"Seventeen years, sir."

"And how many years is it now since you've had charge of Mr. Richard?"

"Ten years, sir, on and off; and seven years altogether," answered Stelfox.

Mr. Bradfield's manner grew harsher, more dictatorial with every succeeding question, almost as if each answer of the man's had been a fresh offence. But Stelfox's manner never changed; it was always respectful, stolid and studiously monotonous. The next question Mr. Bradfield put in a louder, angrier voice than ever.

"And have you ever, in the course of all that time, known Mr. Richard do any harm to man, woman or child?"

For about two seconds the man did not answer; two seconds in which Chris, rendered curious by something in the manner of master and man towards each other, awaited quite eagerly some astonishing reply. She was disappointed. The answer came as smoothly and quietly as ever:

"Never, sir."

Mr. Bradfield turned impatiently to the two ladies.

"You hear," he said triumphantly. "Here is the testimony of a man who has been in constant attendance upon him for seven years, and in partial attendance upon him for three more. Can you have stronger evidence than that?"

"It is quite satisfactory, I am sure," murmured Mrs. Abercarne, who had not the courage to face this overbearing man with questions and doubts.

But Chris was different. Although she longed to stay, although the lunatic, harmless or otherwise,

caused her no fears, she "wanted to know, you know." There was some mystery, trivial, no doubt, about Mr. Richard and his guardian and his keeper.

The manner of the two men towards each other, the furtive, yet impatient glances with which the master regarded the man, the studiously monotonous and mechanical tone in which the man replied to the master, showed that they were not quite honest either towards the other, or else towards her mother and herself. At least, this was what Chris thought, and without pausing to consider how her question might be received, she broke out:

"But, Mr. Bradfield, if he is harmless, why do you shut him up?"

Mrs. Abercarne, although she had not dared to put this question herself, looked gratefully at her daughter, and curiously at her employer. He hesitated a moment, and Chris saw Stelfox glance at his master with an expression of some amusement.

"Well," said Mr. Bradfield at last, rather impatiently, "I am afraid we should none of us find the poor fellow a very desirable companion. He is very noisy, for one thing."

Now both the ladies had had occasion to find out that this latter statement was true, at any rate, so they were silent for a minute. Then Chris, not yet satisfied, spoke again.

"You know," and she turned to Stelfox, "that my mother and I heard you struggling with him, and when you came out we heard you say he was quiet now, as if you had had some trouble with him. How was that if he was so harmless?"

Again Stelfox glanced at his master, and Chris,

following his look, noticed that Mr. Bradfield had become deadly white. He stamped impatiently on the floor as he caught his servant's eye.

"Oh," said Stelfox, after a few seconds' pause, "that was only his rough play."

"Then I don't wonder you keep him shut up," said Chris, drily.

Mr. Bradfield stared at her with a frown on his face. But Chris did not care. They were going away, so she could speak out her mind. There was a pause for some moments, and then Mrs. Abercarne began to fidget a little, being anxious to get away. Mr. Bradfield's frown cleared away as he watched Chris, and at last he said, quite good-humouredly :

"You're an impudent little piece of goods. And so you are going to let my madman frighten you away?"

Chris glanced at her mother. Then she turned boldly, with her hands behind her, and faced him.

"Not if it rested with me, Mr. Bradfield."

He was evidently delighted by her answer, and began to chuckle good-humouredly as he signed to Stelfox to leave the room.

"So you would brave the bogies, would you? And it is only this haughty mother of yours who stands in the way of our all being happy together. Now, come, Mrs. Abercarne, can you resist the appeal of youth and beauty? *I* couldn't."

Mrs. Abercarne, keen-witted as she thought herself, had not noticed so much as Chris had done in the interview between master and man. On the other hand she had taken careful note of the manner in which Mr. Bradfield regarded Chris. And prudence began to whisper that in leaving Wyngnam House she

might be throwing away a chance of establishing her daughter in a rather magnificent manner.

So she laughed gently and showed a disposition to temporise. Whereupon Mr. Bradfield seized his advantage, laid much stress upon the comfort her presence would bestow upon a lonely bachelor, and upon the distinguished service her superintendence of his household would render him. And Chris joining in his pleading with eloquent eyes and a few incoherent words, they succeeded between them in inducing the elder lady to accede to their wishes.

His object once gained, Mr. Bradfield wasted no further time with them, but disappeared quickly with his usual nod of farewell.

Chris, anxious not to leave her mother time to waver, ran across the corridor to their bedroom, unpacked their trunks with rapid hands, and rang the bell for a house-maid to take the trunks themselves away to one of the lumber-rooms, so that Mrs. Abercarne might feel that she had burnt her ships.

Then Chris peeped into the Chinese-room, saw her mother busy at the writing-table, and guessed that she was writing to inform one of her friends of her definite arrangement to stay at Wyngham. Chris thought it would be better not to interrupt her, so she softly closed the door and went down the corridor to make a private inspection of the pictures to fill up the time.

In one of the odd little passages which branched off to the right and left from the corridor, she came upon a picture which seemed to her rather more interesting than the rest; for it was a figure subject, while the rest were chiefly landscapes. The passage was so dark that it was only by opening the door of

one of the rooms to which it led that she could see the picture with any distinctness ; and it was while she was standing on tip-toe to examine it that the sound of stealthy footsteps reached her ears. Peeping out from the nook in which she was hidden, Chris saw at the entrance of the wing the house Mr. Bradfield standing in front of the door of "Mr. Richard's rooms." He was stooping low with his ear to the crack of the door, and his dark face wore an expression of intense anxiety. She had scarcely had time to notice these things when Stelfox came up with absolutely silent footsteps behind his master. His face wore the same expression of hard suppressed amusement which she had noticed on one occasion in the Chinese-room. He did not speak to his master, but stood waiting in a respectful attitude and without uttering a sound. Chris thought the whole scene rather strange, and instead of retreating at once, as she should have done, she kept her eyes fixed upon the pair, from her distant corner, a few moments longer.

So she saw Mr. Bradfield raise his head and turn to walk away ; she saw him start at the sight of Stelfox, and utter an angry exclamation.

But this was eavesdropping, so she drew back hastily out of sight and hearing.

Chris could not, however, get out of her mind the thought that Mr. Bradfield's behaviour was very odd, and that Stelfox's action in waiting coolly there without a word was more odd still.

CHAPTER VI.

MUSIC HATH CHARMS.

TO Mrs. Abercarne's surprise and disappointment, but very much to the relief of Chris, the ladies saw but little of Mr. Bradfield in the first days of their sojourn at Wyngham House. Apart from this, which she considered rather disrespectful and decidedly unappreciative, the elder lady had little to complain of. She found herself absolute mistress of the establishment, with no one to interfere with her, no one to dispute her orders. The word had evidently gone forth that her will was to be law, and her power in every department of the household was unlimited. The only thing she ever wanted in vain was an interview with the master of the house. If she knocked at the door of the study, he answered politely from within that he was busy, and requested her to let him know what she wanted by letter. Then she would write an elaborately courteous note concerning the dismissal of a servant, or a necessary outlay in repairs. His answer was always short, and always to the same effect: she was to do exactly what she pleased, and the expense was immaterial.

With her complaints to Chris that they had very little of his society, her daughter had no sympathy whatever. She did not care for Mr. Bradfield; she was rather afraid of him, and to enjoy his house without his presence was, to her thinking, an abso-

lutely perfect condition of things. It was not to continue indefinitely, however.

Mrs. Abercarne, whose respect for the old china about the house was at least as great as that of its possessor, had assigned to her daughter the duty of dusting and taking care of it. The sight of old Dresden in the hands of the common domestic parlour-maid made her shiver, she said.

So every morning it was the task of Chris to make what she called the grand tour, armed with a pair of dust-bellows and a duster, and provided with an old pair of gloves to keep her hands, as her mother said, "like those of a gentlewoman."

One morning when she had got as far as the drawing-room, and was blowing the dust from a Sèvres cup and saucer, her eye was caught by a canterbury full of music which stood beside the piano. Mother was busy in the basement; Mr. Bradfield was never anywhere near. So Chris slipped off her gloves and went down on her knees and turned over the music to see what it was like. She had the carpet about her well strewn before she found anything to her liking. Then, having come upon a book of ancient dance music, she opened the piano and began, very softly, to try an old waltz tune. She had played very few bars when the door opened and Mr. Bradfield looked in.

Chris started up crimson, feeling that she had done something very dreadful. She thought he would burst out into some rude remark about the strumming disturbing him; but he only strolled as far as the fireplace, which was half-way towards her, put his hands behind his back, nodded, and said:

"Go on."

As he did not smile or speak very kindly, Chris found it impossible to obey. She thought, indeed, that the command was given ironically.

"I—I was only trying a few bars. I—I am very sorry I disturbed you. But I didn't know you could hear. I thought you were deaf," stammered Chris.

Mr. Bradfield looked up at her with a slight frown. No man approaching fifty cares to be reminded, especially by a pretty young woman, of the infirmities which must inevitably overtake him before many years are over.

"Deaf! Thought I was deaf? Pray what made you think that?"

"Well," said Chris, "mother and I both thought you must be, because she so often knocks at your study door, and you don't hear her."

Mr. Bradfield's countenance cleared, and a twinkle appeared in his eyes.

"Oh! ah! No; very likely not." Then he chuckled to himself, and added good-humouredly, "Your mother's a joke, isn't she?"

Chris was taken aback, and for the first moment she could make no answer. So Mr. Bradfield went on:

"Of course, I don't mean anything at all disrespectful to the old lady. She makes a splendid head of a household; servants say she's a regular tar—er—er—a regular darling. But, well, she's a trifle chilling, now, isn't she?"

"My mother is not very effusive in her manners towards people she doesn't know very well," answered Chris, with some constraint.

"That's just what I meant," said Mr. Bradfield,

looking up at the ceiling. "And not knowing me very well, she's not very effusive to me."

Chris, who had seated herself on the music-stool, drew herself up primly. She could not allow her mother to be laughed at.

"I think it's better for people to improve upon acquaintance, instead of making themselves so very sweet and charming at first, that they can't even keep it up."

Mr. Bradfield raised his eyebrows.

"Have I been so sweet and charming, then, that you're afraid that I can't keep it up?"

"No, indeed you haven't," replied Chris promptly, with an irrepressible little laugh.

"That's all right. What were you doing in here?" he went on, looking at the gloves she was drawing on her hands, and at the duster and dust-bellows she had picked up again.

"I was dusting the ornaments."

"What on earth did you want to do that for? Isn't there a houseful of servants to do all that sort of thing?"

"My mother says the care of old china is a lady's work, not a servant's. She would think it wicked to leave such a duty to the maids."

"Well, I don't like to see you do it. It looks as if you were expected to do parlour-maids' work, which you're not."

Chris, with a little flush of curiosity and excitement, rose from her seat, and drummed softly with her gloved finger-tips on the top of the piano. She saw the opportunity to satisfy herself on a point which had been occupying her mind.

"What am I expected to do, then, Mr. Bradfield? That's just what I want to know."

Mr. Bradfield looked rather amused, and did not at once reply.

"That's what you want to know, is it?" said he at last.

"Yes. Why did you advertise for a 'mother and daughter,' unless you had something for the daughter to do?"

There was a short pause, during which Mr. Bradfield looked at her, and chuckled quietly, as if she amused him.

"Upon my soul, I hardly know. I think I had some sort of a notion that a woman with a daughter would settle down more contentedly, and — and wouldn't be so likely to—to give way to bad habits." Here Mr. Bradfield pulled himself up suddenly, recollecting that what he had really feared was an undue predilection for his old port. "You see," he went on hastily, "I had no idea that I should have the luck to get such a—such a—well, such a magnificent person as your mother to condescend to keep house for me in my humble little home. When I advertised, I had no idea of getting my advertisement answered by a—a——"

Chris nodded intelligently.

"I see," said she cheerfully. "What mamma calls a 'gentlewoman.'"

"That's it exactly. And it means a woman who is not gentle to anybody out of her own 'set,' doesn't it?"

Poor Chris wanted to laugh, but was too loyal to her mother to indulge the inclination. But Mr. Bradfield caught the little convulsive sound which intimated that she was amused, and he beamed upon her more benignantly than he had done yet.

"I see, then," she began, in the preternaturally solemn tone of one who has been caught in unseemly hilarity, "that I am here on false pretences, as it were. If I had not been a—a 'gentlewoman'"—again she suppressed a giggle—"you would have had no scruple about my making myself useful."

Mr. Bradfield, evidently delighted by the view the girl took of things, came a little nearer to the piano.

"You *are* a sensible girl," he said, with admiration. "Now, if your mother were like you——" he went on regretfully, and stopped.

"If she were, you wouldn't have your house kept so well," said Chris, merrily. "I'm no use at all in a house, everybody always says. They used to make me play dance music, because there was nothing else I could do."

"Dance music!" echoed Mr. Bradfield hopefully. "I thought you young ladies never condescended to anything beneath a sonata?"

Chris laughed.

"I don't, if my mother can help it," she confessed. "She says a correct taste in music is one of the signs of a gentlewoman, and she makes me study Beethoven and Brahms until I have cultivated a splendid taste for—Sullivan and Lecocq."

"Does she like the sonatas herself?"

"She *says* so; but, then, all ladies with grown-up daughters say that. And she takes me to very dull concerts, of nothing but severely classical music. And she pretends she isn't bored; but, oh! the relief which appears in her poor, dear face when they drop into a stray little bit of tune!"

Mr. Bradfield put his head back and roared with laughter.

"I suppose," he said at last, wistfully, "she wouldn't let you come down here sometimes in the evening and play something frivolous, something lively?"

Chris hesitated.

"I don't know," she said.

"Of course, we would have her down here too," he explained. "And when she felt that she couldn't get on any longer without a dose of Bach, you might indulge her, you know."

Chris, who looked pleased at the prospect, suddenly thought of a difficulty.

"But, Mr. Bradfield," she suggested diffidently, "this music you have here, of course it's very nice, very nice indeed, but it's not quite the latest. 'The Mabel Waltz' and 'Les Cloches du Monastère' are not new, you know."

"We'll soon set that right," said Mr. Bradfield, as he looked at the clock and then at his watch. "I'll wire up to some of the big music shops, and by to-morrow or the day after we'll have all the latest things."

He disappeared with his usual nod, leaving Chris in a state of high excitement. She rushed upstairs to see whether her mother, who had forbidden her to visit her during her morning work in the house-keeper's room, had come up yet.

As she passed the door of the study it opened suddenly, and Mr. Bradfield appeared. He was much struck by the change in her appearance which had taken place in a few minutes since he had left her in the drawing-room. The restraint of his presence once removed, she had given herself up to the wildest excitement, and her face was aglow. She looked so pretty that Mr. Bradfield stared at her with fresh

interest. She was trying to run away when he stopped her by saying :

“Where are you going to in such a hurry?”

“Upstairs to tell my mother about the music,” she answered shyly.

Still he detained her, finding her much more attractive than his accounts.

“Did you ever have a sweetheart?” he asked, after a little pause.

Chris burst out laughing at this ridiculously ingenuous question. Mr. Bradfield repeated it, and this time she answered with delightful frankness.

“Why, I have had a dozen.”

It was his turn to be taken aback.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, with new diffidence, “we must try to find you one here, then.”

Chris shot at him one merry glance, and then looked demurely at the floor.

“You needn’t trouble yourself to do that, Mr. Bradfield, thank you. I can find one for myself if I want one, I daresay.”

And, refusing to be detained any longer, she went upstairs, meeting her mother in the corridor above.

CHAPTER VII.

A PORTRAIT.

"MOTHER--mother, who was the idiot that said riches don't bring happiness?"

It was two days after the interview Chris had had with Mr. Bradfield in the drawing-room, and the new music had come. Mr. Bradfield, who had on several occasions during the past two days caught sight of Chris, but failed to get a word with her, had sent up a message to the effect that if Mrs. and Miss Abercarne would go down to the drawing-room, they would find something there which would interest one of them.

So they went down to the great room, which was cold, with a recently-lighted fire in each of the two grates, and dimly lighted, for there was no gas, and the illumination consisted of a dozen wax candles. Chris, who had put on a dress square in the neck, in honour of the occasion, in spite of her mother's warnings, shivered, but the sight of the great pile of music on two tables in the middle of the room made her forget the cold.

Mrs. Abercarne sighed at her daughter's exclamations. She felt very much inclined to echo the sentiment. Certainly her own happiness had belonged to the time when she had been well off, before frocks had to be turned, and last year's bonnets furbished up.

Mr. Bradfield had not yet come in from the dining-room, so Chris could chatter on at her ease.

"To think of being able to get everything one

wanted, just by sending to town for it. No question whether it costs sixpence or ten pounds. To be able to look into the windows without considering that four and elevenpence three farthings is five shillings. Oh! mother," and she pounced upon a waltz, and a song, and a gavotte, which she felt sure she should like, "I feel as if I were living in an enchanted palace, and as if Mr. Bradfield were the good fairy."

"Mr. Bradfield is very much obliged to you, I'm sure," said the owner of the house, who had come in very quietly, attracted by the sound of her bright voice from the adjoining room. "It's a more flattering comparison than you made to me at first, if I remember rightly."

But Chris was too happy to be troubled by this reminiscence.

"That was nothing to what you may expect if you come upon me without warning when I don't feel very good," said she.

"Let us hear some of the music, Chris," said her mother, afraid that the girl's sauciness might offend the great man.

But Mr. Bradfield was inclined to take everything the young girl said in good part. He even offered to turn the leaves of her music, with apologies for his clumsiness, which was indeed extreme. Chris, who, although not a performer of special excellence, read music well and with spirit, was in an ecstasy of girlish enjoyment, and she communicated the contagion to her older companions. Mr. Bradfield was good humour itself; Mrs. Abercarne was the perfection of graciousness. He hunted out some old photographic albums, the portraits of which she inspected minutely

through her double eye-glasses, with the most flattering comments imagination could suggest.

"You needn't be so polite unless you really like it," he said, drily, when she had just found the word "intellectual" to describe a very grim female face; "they're only relations."

Mrs. Abercarne looked up in astonishment.

"All these are your relations? You must have a great many, then?"

"Swarms of 'em."

Mrs. Abercarne looked through her eyeglasses, no longer at the photographs, but at him.

"I should have thought among so many you might have found some one to manage your establishment without having to advertise," she suggested.

Mr. Bradfield laughed.

"So I could. I could have found a hundred. Some to manage my establishment, some to manage me, some to do both. And then all those whom I had not selected would have come down upon me in a body, and my life wouldn't have been worth a year's purchase among them. It won't be worth much when they find you are here, you and Miss Christina. I shouldn't be surprised if they were to set fire to the house and burn us all up together."

Mrs. Abercarne began to look frightened, while Chris was immensely amused.

"Even money, you see, Miss Christina," he went on, turning to the girl, who indeed engrossed most of his attention, "doesn't keep you free from all worries."

"It does from the worst of them, though," said Chris, sagely. "It saves you from all the little ones, which are much worse to bear every day than one big one now and then. Who wouldn't rather have one

bad attack of typhoid fever and have done with it than have, say toothache, every day? You can't understand how much worse it is to deny yourself every day things which cost a penny, than to resist, once in a way, the temptation to spend a sovereign."

Mr. Bradfield was looking at her intently.

"At any rate," said he, with some wrath in his tone, "as long as you remain here, the sovereigns as well as the pennies will be forthcoming as often as they are wanted."

Here Mrs. Abercarne thought fit to interpose majestically :

"My daughter was only using those particular terms as an illustration," she said, in a suave manner ; "as a matter of fact, neither the pennies nor the sovereigns are matters that concern her."

Both Mr. Bradfield and Chris accepted this rebuke in silence ; but they exchanged a look, and poor Chris could not help remembering Mr. Bradfield's remark that her mother was a joke.

"At the same time," went on Mrs. Abercarne, conscious that she had somewhat checked the evening's pleasure, "I must confess that whatever cares one may have seem lighter when borne in a mansion like this, surrounded by treasures of art, and evidences of high culture."

Mr. Bradfield tried to look as if he appreciated the compliment, and Chris, feeling that the atmosphere was growing frigid again, made a diversion.

"Indeed, Mr. Bradfield," said she, "we're never tired of looking at your beautiful things. Only all the cabinets and cupboards are always locked up, and it is very tantalising not to know what's inside."

"Well, here are my keys," said he, as he took from his pocket a large bunch of various sizes. "Open anything you like ; there is no Blue Beard's chamber here."

Perhaps they thought this remark rather unfortunate, with the knowledge they all had of the locked rooms in the east wing. At any rate, there was an awkward pause as Chris took the keys. He hastened to add :

"There are no rooms in this house, except, of course, poor Dick's, which you may not ransack as much as you like."

"Thank you," said Chris, as she ran to a handsome inlaid cabinet, with a locked cupboard in the centre ; "I'm going to take you at your word, and begin here."

She opened the carved doors, and found a collection of rare coins, which excited in her only a languid interest. Then she examined the contents of a pair of engraved caskets which stood on a side table. Lastly, the shelves of a locked cupboard under a rose-wood book-case engaged her attention.

Here she found something more attractive to her frivolous mind. Hidden away at the back of the bottom shelf was an old cardboard box, containing a miscellaneous collection of portraits, pencil-sketches, faded daguerreotypes, and a few miniatures on ivory.

One of these last attracted her at once in a very strong degree. It was the portrait of a young man, fair, clean-shaven and strikingly handsome, with features slightly aquiline, blue eyes, and an expression which seemed to Chris to denote sweet temper and refinement in equal degrees. She was a long way

from her two companions when she discovered the portrait ; for the bookcase under which the cupboard was occupied a remote corner of the back drawing-room, while her mother and Mr. Bradfield were sitting by the fire in the front room.

She sat so long quietly looking at the miniature, that Mr. Bradfield's attention was attracted.

"Our flibbertigibbet has grown very quiet," said he at last. "I wonder what mischief she is up to!"

As he spoke, he rose softly from his chair, walked on tip-toe to the other end of the room, and peeped round the partition, part of which still remained between the front and the back room. Chris saw him, and started.

"We've caught her in the very act, Mrs. Abercarne!" he cried. "Guilt on every feature!"

Indeed, Chris had blushed a little, and thrust the portrait quickly back on the shelf.

"I was only looking at a picture," she explained quickly. And the next moment, seized by an idea, she snatched up the miniature and held it towards Mr. Bradfield.

"It looks like a portrait," said she. "Do you know who it is?"

As she held up the picture, she saw a change in Mr. Bradfield's face. It was too dark in this back room to see whether he lost colour ; but an expression of what was certainly annoyance, mingled with something that looked like terror, passed over his face. It was gone in a moment, and he answered her calmly enough.

"No," said he, "I don't know who he is. I daresay I bought it in a collection of miniatures."

Chris turned it over in her hand.

"Oh! here's the name, I suppose," she said;
"Gilbert Wryde, 1847.'"

Again, as she glanced up quickly, and rather curiously, she saw the same sort of look for a couple of seconds on Mr. Bradfield's face. But he answered in a tone just as unmoved as before.

"Perhaps it's only the name of the artist who painted it. I should think the date was right, by the costume. Are you fond of miniatures? I have a splendid collection in one of the rooms upstairs. I will show you them to-morrow, if you like."

"Thank you. I don't know that I do care for them so very much. But I like that one. The face is an interesting one."

"I think they used to flatter the sitter a little in the days when people had themselves painted like that," said Mr. Bradfield. "I daresay, now, an artist of those days would have done the fairy's trick, and transformed the beast into a prince. And now, will you let us have that song from 'Utopia' once more before Mrs. Abercarne carries you off?"

Chris rose at once, returned him his keys, and went to the piano. She sang the song he had asked for, received Mr. Bradfield's enthusiastic thanks, and noticed that he seemed in higher spirits than he had been all the evening. He gave Mrs. Abercarne her candle, bowed her out of the room, and contrived to detain Chris a moment longer.

"We must absolutely find you that sweetheart," said he, in a low voice, and in rather wistful tones. "You will be dull in this outlandish place without one."

"You must absolutely leave me to do as I like about that, Mr. Bradfield," replied Chris, saucily
"And I am never dull anywhere."

"I wish I could say the same of myself," said he, heartily.

And then he let her go, wishing her good-night with some constraint, which she, used to admiration from young and old, did not fail to notice.

She ran upstairs, and joined her mother at the door of their room. Mrs. Abercarne looked at the girl as soon as they got inside the door.

"What was Mr. Bradfield saying to you, Chris?" she asked, with apparent indifference, as she took from her head the scrap of old point lace which she thought proper to wear by way of a cap.

"Oh, he said he must get me a sweetheart, and I told him he might save himself the trouble," said she, lightly. "Don't you think it very silly of him to say those things to me, mother?"

Mrs. Abercarne paused a moment, and then answered, thoughtfully:

"I think he means to be kind. He always speaks as if he took an interest in you—a great interest."

Chris glanced quickly at her mother.

"An interest! Oh, yes," said she.

Then there was another short silence, during which Chris knelt in front of the fireplace and stared intently at the red coals.

"You don't seem very grateful, dear!"

The girl started.

"Grateful! I? What for?" she asked stupidly.

"Why, Chris, you are in the clouds! What, were you thinking about Mr. Bradfield?"

"Mr. Bradfield!" echoed the young girl, with a laugh of derision. "No, mother; I was thinking about that face in the miniature."

Her mother laughed, rather contemptuously.

"I shouldn't waste many thoughts upon a portrait painted forty years ago!" she said somewhat scornfully. "Why, child, the idea of growing sentimental about a man who, if he is still alive, must be seventy if he is a day!"

"Sentimental!" echoed Chris. "Did I speak sentimentally? I did not know it. But—I should like to know something about the man whose portrait it was. It was an interesting face, mother. I will show it you to-morrow, and you shall judge for yourself whether I am not right."

Mrs. Abercarne, seeing that the girl was too much occupied in thinking of the picture to give her attention to anything else, gave up her attempt to sound her on another subject, and talked about the music until they both went to sleep.

On the following day, when Chris was in the drawing-room with her duster, she remembered the fascinating miniature, and thought she would like to have another look at it by daylight. So she went into the back drawing-room, remembering that she had forgotten to lock the cupboard door when she handed back his keys to Mr. Bradfield.

Someone had been there before her, however, for the door was now securely locked. Chris was vexed at this, and gave the door an impatient little shake. The cupboard was old, and the bolt gave way under this rough handling. She had not expected this, but, as it had happened, she felt justified in taking advantage of the occurrence, for Mr. Bradfield had given her permission to examine what she pleased.

Opening the door, therefore, she took out the box, which had been replaced at the back of its shelf, and turned out the contents in search of the miniature.

She took out every separate thing, she thoroughly examined not only that shelf but the others; and then she shut the cupboard, disappointed and puzzled.

The miniature was no longer there.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STRANGE FACE IN THE EAST WING.

CHRIS thought this incident very strange. She pondered it in her mind, and mentioned it to her mother in a manner which showed that she considered it a suspicious one.

Mrs. Abercarne looked at the matter differently. There were a thousand reasons, any one of which might be the right one in this case, why a gentleman should choose to transfer some object in his possession from one place of safe keeping to another. It might be the portrait of an old friend——

"But he said he didn't know who it was," objected Chris.

"Well, it may be a particularly good painting, so that he may wish to add it to the collection of miniatures upstairs which he spoke of," said Mrs. Abercarne, who now showed herself ready at all times to take Mr. Bradfield's part. "Or perhaps," she hazarded, with a rapid glance at the girl's face, "he did not quite like your taking such a strong interest in the portrait of another gentleman."

"Indeed, I don't see how that could concern him," returned Chris, coldly.

The young girl quite understood these allusions on her mother's part to Mr. Bradfield's evident admiration. But she would not allow the subject to be

mentioned; and her mother, who, poor lady, was not unnaturally delighted at the prospect she thought she discerned of marrying her pretty daughter well, thought it wiser not to precipitate matters.

For already the bird seemed to have taken fright, and grown shy, as if seeing or suspecting a snare. Mr. Bradfield was always trying to waylay Chris for the sake of a few moments' talk with her, and always failing in the attempt. At last he complained to Mrs. Abercarne in terms which almost amounted to a declaration of the state of his feelings with regard to her.

"She is young and wilful," answered the mother, who thought that this shyness on the girl's part was likely to give a wholesome stimulus to the gentleman's attachment. "I don't think she takes any serious views of life at present. Better not to speak to her just yet on any matter more momentous than concerts and dances."

"Dances!" echoed Mr. Bradfield, dubiously. "Is she dull down here, then? I hope she is not too fond of balls and gaiety?"

"Not more fond than a girl ought to be," answered Mrs. Abercarne, promptly. She had no notion of tying her daughter to a man who would not let her enjoy herself as she liked. If Mr. Bradfield wanted a young wife with the tastes of an old one, he must give up all thought of marrying Chris. "She is a good waltzer, and loves a dance."

Mr. Bradfield looked rather morose, rather crest-fallen.

"Well," he said at last, "I'll give a ball at Christmas. The worst of it is, that a host of my confounded relations will insist upon coming, and—and

if they have their suspicions roused, there'll be the —— to pay!"

"Then, if you are so much afraid of your relations, Mr. Bradfield, I should study them by all means," said Mrs. Abercarne, loftily, as she left him upon the excuse that she had some work to do.

He growled to himself that he would have nothing more to do than he was obliged with either arrogant mother or flighty daughter; but he failed lamentably to keep his resolution. The girl's pretty face and lively manners had enslaved him, and try as he would, this middle-aged gentleman could not conquer the foolish longing to become the husband of a woman twenty-five years younger than himself.

Meanwhile, Chris was unconsciously doing her utmost to keep alive the admiration of her elderly admirer, by being as happy as the day was long. And as happiness is becoming, the glimpses Mr. Bradfield caught of her bright face and lithe figure were daily more tantalising. Mr. Bradfield was not vain enough to think that he should get this beautiful young girl to fall in love with him, at any rate before marriage. He reckoned on the absence of rivalry, and on her great and increasing affection for her new home. Already she knew every object in Mr Bradfield's collection by heart, and could have found her way blindfold into any corner of the grounds.

There was one exception, and it galled her. To the west of the house the grounds were very open, for the flower-garden was on that side, and the trees had been cut down in order to get more sun on the borders. On the south, towards the sea, a lawn sloped gently down from the house to the outer fence

On the north side was the carriage drive, and more flower-beds. But the grounds on the east side she had been unable to explore, as they were cut off from the rest by a light ornamental iron fence, and two gates, one on the north side and one on the south, which were kept locked.

She had gone so far as to ask one of the under gardeners to let her go through ; but he had respectfully referred her to the head gardener, whereupon she had given up her design as hopeless, divining, as she did, that he would refer her to Mr. Bradfield, and that Mr. Bradfield would make some excuse to prevent her going through. For the girl knew very well, in spite of the frank manner in which he spoke of the east wing and its occupant, that there was some sort of mystery, some secret, big or little, connected with Mr. Richard, and she believed that it was on account of the madman's presence in the east wing that the grounds on that side of the house were closed. She thought she would trust to her chances of getting inside those gates without asking anybody's permission. They must be unlocked sometimes, and as she was always about the grounds, she had only to wait for her opportunity.

Of course she was right. The opportunity came one morning, when one of the gardeners had gone through the north gate with a wheel-barrow, leaving the key in the gate behind him.

Chris, who was looking out of her bed-room window, ran downstairs and out of the house, and was through the gate in a moment.

A winding gravel path led through a thick growth of trees to the kitchen garden, where she saw Johnson, the second gardener, busy with the celery-bed.

He saw her, but touched his hat, and took no further notice beyond a faint grin. Probably the affairs of the household were sufficiently discussed in the servants' hall for him to guess that the young lady's transgression would be overlooked at headquarters. Chris sauntered on, peeping into the tomato-houses, and trying to look through the steaming glass of the fern-houses, until she was well under the windows of the shut-up rooms. And she now perceived that there were bars in front of all of them.

The girl was a little impressed by this, and she kept well among the trees, with a feeling that some hideous maniac's face might appear at one of the windows, and make grimaces at her. It was easy for her to remain hidden herself from any eyes in the east wing but very sharp ones; for under the trees was a growth of bushes and shrubs, through which she could peep herself at the barred windows. She had made her way cautiously, and under cover, from the north to the south, and turning, she could see the sea between the branches. But from the first floor the view of the sea was, in great part, spoiled by the thick growth of the upper branches of the big elms and fir trees which allowed a good view between their bare trunks from the ground floor.

Chris met nobody, and she saw nobody at the front windows. Rather disappointed, she was making her way back again, in order to get out through the gate by which she had entered, when, glancing up at one of the east windows on the first floor, she saw that, since she had last passed, a man had seated himself close to the panes.

At the first moment she of course thought this must be the maniac, and she quickly concealed herself

behind one of the bushes by the side of the path, so that she could get a good view of him without his seeing her. But a very few seconds made her alter her first impression. Surely this was no madman, this handsome man with the pale, refined face, and large, melancholy eyes. The face was young, at least she thought so at the first look. It was not until she had examined it for some seconds that she saw the deep lines and furrows about the mouth and eyes, and the silver patches in the hair, which was long, and brushed back from the face.

Chris drew a deep breath. Something in the face made her think she had seen it before. The long and slightly aquiline nose, the straight mouth with its finely-cut lips, the brushed-back hair—she seemed to know them all, as part of a picture she had lately seen. Suddenly an exclamation broke from her lips. The miniature! yes, the face at the window was the face in the little picture. This must be Gilbert Wryde.

Chris was much puzzled. Was he the doctor who attended Mr. Richard, or an old friend who had come to see him? This seemed the more probable of the two suppositions; for if the portrait had been that of the madman's doctor, Mr. Bradfield would scarcely have said that he did not know him.

But then the date on the portrait, 1847? The painting was that of a young man in the very prime of life. In spite of the lines in his face and the silver in his hair, it was impossible that the face behind the barred window could be that of a man at least seventy years of age.

Chris began to feel herself blushing, ashamed of the unseen watch she was keeping upon a strange man.

The sun of a very bright December morning was upon his face, and upon a gold watch which he held in his hand and looked at intently. This fact, together with the intense seriousness of his face, caused Cris to revert to her idea that he must be a physician. She had not heard that Mr. Richard was ill, but that was nothing, for his name, as far as she knew, was very little mentioned in the household, and he might be ill without her ever hearing of it.

She thought it probable that he was not only ill, but that his malady had reached some grave crisis; for the face at the window was quite serious enough to warrant the supposition that he was counting the minutes in a case of life and death. This idea seized upon her so strongly that she found herself watching for a change in his face, thinking she should be able to tell whether the expression altered to one of hope or to one of despair.

Presently the expression did change. A look of eager expectancy appeared in it as the dark eyes looked up. The unknown man put his watch back in his pocket, and disappeared quickly from the window.

Chris, who was surprised to find that she had been standing still long enough to grow cold and stiff, moved quickly away from her hiding-place with a flush of shame in her cheeks. A few steps further along the winding path under the trees, on which the decaying leaves lay thickly, brought her out into the kitchen garden. Johnson had finished with his celery and was going into one of the houses to look at his cuttings. He glanced up at her, and she thought she would ask him a question.

"Is Mr. Richard ill, Johnson, do you know?" she said.

"Not as I knows on, miss. At least, not worse nor ordinary," he said, with a slight gesture of the head to denote where his weakness lay.

"Then why has he got a doctor with him?"

"He ain't got no doctor with him, not as fur as I knows on, miss."

"The gentleman with the long grey hair; isn't he a doctor?"

"Why, no, Miss," answered Johnson, with a grin; "the gentleman with the long hair is Mr. Richard himself."

Chris was so much astonished that for a moment she stared at the man and said nothing. Then she repeated, slowly:

"Mr. Richard! Why, he looks sane!"

Johnson shook his head.

"He do sometimes, miss," he answered, with an air of superior wisdom. "Other times he carries on awful, smashes the windows, and makes noises and cries to make your blood run cold. That's how it is, as I've heard, with folks that's not got their proper wits. You'd think they was as wise as you and me, and then something upsets 'em and off they go sudden-like, an' raises old 'Arry before you can say Jack Robinson."

Chris was cut to the heart. Whether she would have felt quite so much compassion for Mr. Richard if he had been stout, red-faced and stubbly-haired is, unfortunately, open to question. But the idea of this man with the handsome features and the interesting expression passing his life shut up in those lonely rooms, with no society but that of Stelfox the Stolid, shocked her, and made her miserable. She could not realise his condition; could not understand mental

deficiency in the owner of a face which seemed to her as intellectual as it was good-looking. In a state of the strongest excitement she turned back again into the shrubbery to try to get one more look at the madman, and discover, if she could, in the placid, grave features some sign of the disorder behind them.

A romantic notion had seized her that perhaps the most had not been done that could be done for him, and that she might be the means of inducing Mr. Bradfield to make one last and more successful effort to restore him to reason.

And as this thought passed through her mind, the voice of Mr. Bradfield himself calling to her made her start and look round.

He was coming out of the orchid house, and he addressed her by name in a tone of surprise and some displeasure.

"Miss Christina! Is that you? What are you doing in this part of the world?"

"You know you said that I might examine every corner of the place if I liked," answered Chris, blushing. "But I have never been able to get into this particular corner until to-day."

"Why didn't you ask me to bring you here? I would have shown you anything you wanted to see, and should have had great pleasure in doing so, as you know," replied he, still with some stiffness. "As it is, I suppose you have not seen much to interest you? You have not been into any of the houses?"

"I haven't been into any of the houses, but I have seen something to interest me," answered Chris, with her heart beating fast.

She had resolved to be bold, and to carry on her

scheme on behalf of Mr. Richard, while excitement gave her courage. Mr. Bradfield raised his eyebrows a little, and Chris looked down, lest she should be frightened by his frowns.

"I have seen poor Mr. Richard—at the window," she answered, drawing her breath quickly, and feeling rather than seeing, that Mr. Bradfield was displeased. "And—and I want to know, Mr. Bradfield, if you will let my mother and me see him, and speak to him?"

"Speak to him!" exclaimed Mr. Bradfield shortly. "Speak to a madman! Well, you can, certainly if you like. But we shall have to take some precautions, as the very sight of a woman throws him into a frenzy. The sex is his pet aversion."

Chris looked incredulous; she could not help it. It is always difficult to understand that one can have no attraction for a creature who attracts oneself, and Mr. Richard certainly attracted her.

"I can't think what has put the idea into your head of wishing to speak to him," went on Mr. Bradfield, in a tone of open annoyance. "Surely you don't think he is ill-treated under my roof? Stelfox is a man in every way to be trusted, and you can ask him yourself about the poor fellow's condition."

"I didn't mean that, I didn't mean to imply that he was not kindly treated," answered Chris, hastily. "But he looks so sane, so quiet; I was wondering whether something might not perhaps be done for him if you sent him to be seen by some celebrated mad doctor. I daresay you will think it very impertinent of me to make such a suggestion," added the girl, laughing rather shyly, as if deprecating his anger at her boldness, "but you know mother always says

I'm an impudent monkey, and I can't help my nature, can I?"

But Mr. Bradfield did not take her remarks as kindly as usual. He frowned, and seemed to be thinking out some idea which had entered his mind while she was speaking. There was a short pause before he said, not noticing her last words :

"You think he is quiet, do you? You think I am exaggerating when I tell you he hates the sight of a woman. Well, you shall see. Wait here a moment while I find out where he is."

Mr. Bradfield left her by herself for a short time, while he followed the path among the trees, towards the sea-front. Chris felt chilled and miserable. He seemed so much annoyed that she feared that she had done more harm than good by her interference. All that she had gained was the knowledge that Mr. Richard's case was considered hopeless; and this knowledge caused her infinite pain. She looked up again at the barred windows, and pictured to herself the blank, dismal life of the man who lived in those gloomy rooms, where the branches of the trees shut out the sun. What were the thoughts that occupied the mind of the unhappy man who lived there? Whom was he waiting for, watch in hand? Was it for someone to cheer him in his solitude, someone who never came?

Silly Chris had tears in her eyes at the thought. She brushed them away hastily as Mr. Bradfield came hurriedly back. He looked excited, and there was a confident look on his face, which showed his belief that he could convert her to his own views of the madman.

"Come," said he. "Come this way, through the front gate."

Rather surprised, and wondering where he was going to lead her to, Chris followed Mr. Bradfield, not along the paths among the trees, but by a more open one, which passed nearer to the walls of the house, between two flower-borders. They turned the corner of the house, and as they did so, Mr. Bradfield looked up at the first-floor windows on the south side.

Mr. Richard was standing at one of them, with his face close to the glass, looking out.

"Mind," said Mr. Bradfield, as he put one hand as if for protection on her shoulder, "when he sees you he will fall into a paroxysm of fury. But don't be frightened ; I'll take care you come to no harm."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Mr. Richard glanced down and saw the young lady with Mr. Bradfield. Just as the latter had predicted, Mr. Richard's face changed in a moment from its quiet melancholy to an expression like that of an enraged wild animal. Before she had time either to run forward or backward, she heard the crash of glass above her, and a heavy glass goblet was flung down on to the ground beside her, narrowly missing her head. Then she heard a wild, unearthly cry, followed by a torrent of discordant utterances impossible to understand, except as the mad gibberings of a hopeless lunatic.

With a little scream she escaped from Mr. Bradfield, who had thrown his arm round her, and ran back towards the gate by which she had entered the enclosure.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. BRADFIELD'S "SMART" RELATIONS.

TO have a personal attack made upon her by a lunatic is enough to alarm the most intrepid girl. And Chris, although not a coward, not even given to hysterical attacks over black-beetles, was a good deal frightened by her first experience of Mr. Richard's violence.

By the time she was safely out of the enclosure, however, she had recovered from her first alarm ; and, dropping from a run into a walk, she paused before carrying out her first idea of running indoors to tell her mother what had happened.

Why should she say anything about it to Mrs. Abercarne ? Her mother had hardly yet got over her repugnance to staying under the same roof with a lunatic. If her terrors were to be revived by hearing of the adventure that had befallen her daughter, she would make fresh difficulties about staying, and perhaps exhaust Mr. Bradfield's patience. And Chris, though she could not be blind to the difficulties which Mr. Bradfield's admiration began to put in the way of their remaining in his house, did not wish to hasten the moment when they must leave it. So she turned away from the house, and sauntered between the bare borders and empty flower-beds, to calm herself a little before returning to her mother's presence.

"Well, what did I tell you ?" said Mr. Bradfield, in an exultant tone. "Are you still as anxious as ever for an interview with our young friend ?"

Chris, annoyed with herself, vented her annoyance on him. So she turned to say, snappishly :

“ Yes, quite as anxious ; and more anxious still that he should be seen by a doctor.”

Mr. Bradfield's face changed. The sullen frown which, whenever it appeared, made his dark face so very unprepossessing, came over it as he said shortly :

“ You presume too much.”

And he turned on his heel abruptly, and went indoors.

Chris felt quite glad she had offended him. From one point of view, as the master of the house where she and her mother lived so comfortably, she liked him very much. From any other she began to feel that she did not like him at all. She felt again the aversion with which he had inspired her on the day of her arrival, an aversion which his kindness had been gradually dispelling. Perhaps it was that he showed too decided an acquiescence in the fact that his ward's mental malady was incurable. Or it may have been vexation at his exposing her to the danger of the madman's anger, and at the daring familiarity with which he had put his arm round her shoulder in an alleged attempt to protect her. Or, possibly, her renewed dislike was only the result of that instinct by which women leap to conclusions without reasoning out the facts. It is at any rate certain that the girl felt at that moment considerably more fear of Mr. Bradfield than she did of the madman in the east wing. To be sure, the latter was shut up, and the former was not.

She did not go indoors until she had quite recovered from the effects of the scene she had gone

through ; so that Mrs. Abercarne noted nothing unusual in her countenance or manner.

It was after luncheon on the same day, that Chris, sitting with her embroidery in the corridor, which was warmed with hot-water pipes, and was her favourite retreat, was surprised to be addressed by Stelfox, who was carrying a couple of large books from one of the upstairs bookcases in the direction of the east wing.

"You were not much frightened, I hope, this morning, miss, by Mr. Richard's antics?" he asked, in his quiet, stolid manner. Chris had a liking for this man as unreasonable as her dislike of his master. She had seldom spoken to him ; when he met her he had usually stood out of her way like an automaton, so that it was not upon discerning acquaintance that her predilection was founded. Still, it was a fact and she smiled as she assured him that if she was frightened she soon got over it.

"But where were you?" she went on in some surprise. "Were you upstairs with Mr. Richard? No," she continued, answering herself, as she remembered to have seen Stelfox coming in by the front gates as she ran out of the enclosure, "you had gone out into the town. How did you know, then, that I was frightened? Did Mr. Bradfield tell you?"

Stelfox allowed his straight mouth to widen a little in what passed with him for a smile.

"No, miss. Master never talks about Mr. Richard to anyone. I heard it from the young gentleman himself when I took him in his luncheon."

Chris looked at him in astonishment.

"He told you! He's sane enough to know what

he does, then, and to talk about it afterwards? Do *you* believe that he is really incurable?"

"Well, he's pretty bad sometimes," answered he, not giving a direct answer. "Perhaps you haven't heard the way he cries out, and the odd noises he makes, miss?"

Chris gave a little shudder.

"Yes; and it's very dreadful to hear him. But——"

She paused, and looked at the sky, which, now darkening a little towards evening, could be seen between the bare branches of the trees. Stelfox was silent too, but it suddenly flashed through the mind of Chris that his was a discreet silence which had meaning in it. Before either spoke again, Stelfox lifted the lid of the box-ottoman near which he was standing, and rapidly but very quietly slipped inside the two books he had been carrying, and was immediately in the same attitude of respectful attention as before. Then for the first time she heard the creaking of a stair, and, turning her head, she saw Mr. Bradfield approaching.

To her great delight, for she had begun on the instant to dread a *tête-à-tête* with him, Mr. Bradfield scowled as he caught sight of her, and disappeared into a sort of workshop he had on the first floor, where he often spent the afternoon busy with a turning-lathe.

As soon as his master was out of sight, Stelfox took the two books out of the ottoman. Chris watched him in evident surprise. Then a thought struck her.

"You were going to take those books to Mr. Richard?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Yes, miss."

"And you were afraid he wouldn't like you to?"

"Well, miss," said Stelfox, again with the contortion he meant for a smile, "Mr. Bradfield don't understand his ways as well as I do, and he thinks books wouldn't be safe with him. But I know when to trust him with 'em, and he's as quiet as a lamb this afternoon."

He was going on towards Mr. Richard's room, when the young lady detained him, saying, in a low voice :

"Did he say, Stelfox, that he really meant to hurt me, this morning?"

Stelfox looked down at the carpet, and, for a moment, made no answer. Then he looked up, and caught a look of suspense and impatience on her face. Looking down again at once, he said, drily :

"No, miss ; I don't recollect as he told me that."

Then he withdrew, leaving the young lady in a state of curiosity and strange excitement.

Why should she care whether this poor lunatic wanted to hurt her or not? Surely the only thing that concerned her was that it should be out of his power to do so. This was what Chris told herself. But her girlish sense of romance was tickled by the whole story—by the knowledge of the solitary and sad life this man was leading, close to his fellow-creatures, and yet shut out from them ; by a remembrance of the incident of the miniature, which would have passed for his portrait, and yet which surely could not be his ; above all by the man himself, with his handsome face and weary eyes.

For the next few days, neither Chris nor her mother saw much of Mr. Bradfield. But he soon

forgot or forgave her indiscreet interference on Mr. Richard's behalf, for when he did see her, he bantered her, good-humouredly, about the approaching ball, for which the invitations were being sent out. With this work, however, the ladies had little to do, except to help Mr. Bradfield's secretary—a pale, fair, weak-eyed young man named Manners—in directing the envelopes.

While this work of sending out the invitations was still in progress, Mrs. Abercarne received a note from Mr. Bradfield, requesting that she and her daughter would do him the pleasure of breakfasting, lunching and dining with him every day, and that they would begin that very evening.

No sooner had they taken their seats at the table for the first time, than Mr. Bradfield took an open letter from his pocket, and gave it to the elder lady to read.

"I have asked you to keep me company," said he, grimly, "to save me from *that*!"

Mrs. Abercarne read the letter, which was in a large and modern lady's hand. The paper was perfumed, and in colour a very pale rose-pink—the latest Bayswater fashion in notepaper

"CAMBRIDGE TERRACE,

"KENSINGTON, W.

"MY DEAR COUSIN JOHN—Need I say how utterly delighted we were with your most kind invitation? Lilith and Rose are perfectly charmed, and so is Donald, whom you will not recognise! He has grown into a splendid fellow. What is this I hear, that you have been so dull that you have had to get a housekeeper? Surely you know that you

had only to mention it, and we would have done long ago what we propose to do now, namely—migrate from town to the wilds of Wyngham to be near you. Yes, this is absolutely and truly what we are going to do. Retrenchment is the order of the day, now that we have a family growing up around us, and I think we cannot do better than settle ourselves where we shall get the benefit of the shadow of your wing. I suppose there is some society in or about the place, and the fact of our being related to you, besides the value of our own name, would of course give us the *entrée*. Would it be asking too much of you to look out for a modest house such as you would care for your relations to live in; not too far away from you, I need not say.

"William wishes to be remembered to you most kindly. As for Rose and Lilith, and the boys, they send so many messages that I cannot remember them all.

"Believe me, dear cousin John, you shall not long be left to the hired society of strangers, when your own family are only too anxious to do all they can to cheer you, and to serve you in any way in their power.

"Ever your sincerely affectionate cousin,

"MAUDE GRAHAM-SHUTE."

Mrs. Abercarne read the letter slowly through with the help of her eyeglasses, and then gave it back in a dignified manner.

"A very affectionate letter," she remarked, having read between the lines of the effusive epistle and conceived for its writer an antagonism quite as violent as that which the writer evidently felt towards her.

"Very affectionate," he answered, drily. "It will cost me say two hundred pounds. And cheap at the price, perhaps, you'll say."

Mrs. Abercarne coughed: comment was dangerous, and, indeed, unnecessary. Chris, who, without having seen the letter, made a judicious guess at the tenor of it, glanced from the one to the other.

"You will think I have brought it on myself," he went on, as he glanced once more at the letter before putting it in his pocket. "However, the woman is so amusing with her airs and her pretensions that I am doing the neighbourhood a good turn by providing it with a laughing-stock. A good-natured soul, too! I was in love with her once. There was less of her then."

Every word he uttered concerning the effusive cousin increased the aversion with which Mrs. Abercarne already regarded her.

"I've asked them to come for the week," he went on. "From Monday to Monday. You will give them what rooms you please, Mrs. Abercarne. There'll be five of 'em—old couple, two grown-up daughters and a grown-up son. And you and Miss Christina will do your best to amuse them, I'm sure."

Mrs. Abercarne had grave doubts whether the visitors would allow themselves to be amused, but she did not say so. Mr. Bradfield did not like difficulties to be mentioned in the way of his whims, and it was one of his whims to fill his house at Christmas time, and another to play the patron to his poorer relations. She began to fear that the pleasant and independent time she and her daughter had enjoyed at Wyngham House was over.

For Mrs. Graham-Shute—she knew by a fine woman's instinct—would "interfere."

CHAPTER X

MRS. GRAHAM-SHUTE MANŒUVRES.

IT was ten days later that Mrs. Graham-Shute arrived, according to her promise, at Wyngham House.

Chris, much against her will, was stationed, by Mr. Bradfield's special request, to **receive** the visitors. Mrs. Abercarne tried to persuade him that he himself ought to meet such distinguished guests, but he laughed, and said "he couldn't stand the old woman's gush; if a reception by Miss Christina wasn't good enough for them, they might do without one altogether, and be hanged to them."

So Christiana amused herself at the piano until Mrs. Grahame-Shute was announced. The girl came forward modestly to receive the new-comers, who were talking loudly as they entered. At the first moment she thought it was an affectation to put her out of countenance, but she soon found out that the Graham-Shutes never did anything without making four times as much noise over it as anybody else would have done.

Thus, Mrs. Graham-Shute came in with rustling skirts and jingling bonnet ornaments, while Donald laughed in a deep bass voice, and entered with a tread as heavy as a dragoon's.

"My *dear* John, where are you? It was quite too sweet of you to——"

Suddenly becoming aware that "dear John" was nowhere to be seen, and that there was only a slender and remarkably pretty girl bowing and smiling to her rather timidly, Mrs. Graham-Shute stopped short, drew in her extended hand, and stared at Chris with a face which had in an instant lost its air of expansive good humour.

Chris, who had been reassured by the good-natured expression which she had at first seen on the visitor's face, felt a chill come over her. She was not afraid of this self-important lady, but she perceived at once that there would be "unpleasantness" between her and "mamma." With the quickness of budding womanhood, she had taken in at a glance every detail of the new-comer's appearance, and had had time for a peep at the young people behind.

And what she had seen was a woman of medium height, enormously stout, with a large, many-chinned face, in which were a pair of eyes which ran over her interlocutor for a few moments with frank curiosity, and then grew dull, while her tongue still ran on, and her mind occupied itself with some subject foreign to her words.

So that while her words to Chris were, "Dear me! So very sorry that Mr. Bradfield was too busy to receive us himself! The poor dear man really does work too hard with his collections, and his philanthropical projects!" her thoughts were: "I wonder who on earth you are, and what you're doing here! And I hope, whoever you are, that we shall be able to turn you out!"

Unfortunately, her thoughts spoke through her looks more eloquently than her words. Between her suspicions of the real state of the case, and the possi-

bility that this young lady might be a relation of Mr. Bradfield's, the poor lady felt uncertain how to treat her, and alternated between the most distant coldness and bursts of confidential effusiveness. When, however, Chris said: "Would you like to go up to your rooms? My mother thought you would like what we call the lighthouse room at the end," Mrs. Graham-Shute stared at her with unmistakable hostility.

"Your mother is staying here with you, then?" she said shortly.

"My mother is the housekeeper," answered Chris, with a blush.

Poor Mrs. Graham-Shute's extensive person seemed to expand still further under the influence of her just indignation. To be received by this minx of a housekeeper's daughter! A girl whose very existence, to judge by her face and figure, was a danger and an insult to all Mr. Bradfield's relations who had any expectations from him. What was dear John thinking about? She called her children much as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings at approaching danger, and they bustled and bounced out of the room.

Chris was mortified, but she had expected something of the sort, so she conquered the feeling easily. She would not go up to her mother, who was dressing for dinner, to delay her and worry her by a description of the new arrivals. Mrs. Abercarne could take her own part whatever happened, and there was no need to let her anticipate evil more than she had already done.

In the meantime, Mrs. Graham-Shute had not dared to make any comment on the situation until she was well past the study door. But upstairs, meeting

her husband, who had gone straight to the stables for a cigar after his journey, she poured out her wrath in a ceaseless torrent.

Mr. Graham-Shute was a small, inoffensive man, and he looked smaller and more inoffensive still when in the company of his wife. He was the grandson of a man who had been a great poet, and there is no need to say more about him than that he was a striking example of the fact that genius is not hereditary. Being used to his wife's harangues, he listened indifferently to this one; and the only point in it which excited him to any attention was her account of the good looks of the interloper.

"Pretty girl, is she?" said he, with interest, when his better half took breath for a moment. "I must make haste and dress and run down and have a look at her!"

The poor lady was hardly more fortunate with her children. Lilith was rather pretty, Rose was rather plain; the former had dark eyes and a loud voice, and the latter had light eyes and no voice at all. They both thought that mamma was making a great fuss about a small matter, and Lilith told her so.

Unable to get any sympathy from this quarter, Mrs. Graham-Shute tried her son. Donald, who was the apple of his mother's eye, had been coarsely and aptly described by Mr. Bradfield before his arrival as a rough young cub. He was a great, loud-voiced, awkward hobbledohoy, who had remained at this stage much longer than he would otherwise have done through the injudicious management of his mother. He couldn't be made to see things from his mother's point of view at all. Chris was an "awfully pretty

girl," and looked like an "awfully jolly one." In consequence of her presence he looked forward to having a very much pleasanter time at Wyngham House than he had ever had there before.

"I shouldn't worry myself about it, mother. In fact, I don't know what you are worrying about," he said, when she paused for breath. "The girl's a lady, and——"

"Why, you idiot! don't you see that's the danger?" gasped his mother. "She's a lady, and she's young and good-looking. And if she gets him to marry her, there'll be an end of any hope of his doing anything for you, or for any of us!"

"Gets him to marry her!" roared Donald, indignantly. "Why, the old fool might think himself precious lucky if he were to get her to marry him! Why, she's one of the most charming——"

"Sh—sh!" said his mother, pinching his arm in her terror lest he should be overheard. "For goodness' sake hold your tongue. I've no doubt these people have their spies about, and if we're not very civil to them, they'll persuade cousin John to be rude to us, or something dreadful."

"You needn't fear that I shall be anything but civil to that girl," said Donald, as if conscious that his civility was rather a precious thing.

And Mrs. Graham-Shute left her son with a sigh of self-pity at obtaining so little sympathy from her "own people."

She was an inventive woman, however, where her own little schemes were concerned, and an idea had come into her head. If it should prove, as she feared, that there was any danger of "dear John's" being enslaved by the housekeeper's pretty daughter, why

should she not put "a drag" across the scent in the shape of her son? He was handsome and fascinating beyond all men, and was twenty-five years younger than John Bradfield. He was already attracted by the girl, who could not fail to be flattered by his admiration, whatever her designs might be upon the master of the house. If Donald would have the sense to make love to her without exciting the jealous suspicions of his cousin, he might draw off the girl's attention, and give his mother time to "look round" in the interests of herself and her family.

In the meantime, she made up her mind to "be civil."

This proved a more difficult task than she had expected. At dinner she found Mrs. Abercarne installed in the place of the mistress of the house. She saw "dear John," who had welcomed her without effusiveness, casting sheep's eyes in the direction of Miss Abercarne. As she expressed it afterwards to her husband, who was delighted with Chris:

"You couldn't move for Abercarnes. It was 'Mrs Abercarne, will you do this?' and 'Miss Abercarne can tell you that,' from morning till night!"

On the whole, dinner was a calamitous function. Mr. Graham-Shute, who was neither a busybody nor a schemer, but simply an easy-going gentleman, without any great measure of tact, made, in spite of frowns of warning from his wife, more than one awkward remark. In the first place, he asked John Bradfield, across the table, whether he still kept his private lunatic on the establishment.

"Because if you do, you know, my dear fellow," he went on, "I sha'n't be able to sleep a wink."

Mr. Bradfield answered, very shortly:

"I don't see what that can have to do with your sleeping!"

"Don't you? Why, John, your memory's going. Have you forgotten the row he kicked up last time we were here, and how we all thought he would bring his door down? And the man who looks after him, or, at least, who did then, man named Stelfox, said he always went on like that when there were visitors in the house. I declare I shouldn't have dared to come to-day if I thought you'd got him still!"

"Why didn't you ask me, then?" said John Bradfield, drily. "I didn't want to have you here against your will."

"Really, William," broke in Mrs. Graham-Shute, in an agony, "I don't know how you can be so absurd. How can it matter to you who is in one part of a large house like this, when you are far away in the other?"

"Oh! of course, it's all right as long as he's safely locked up," said her husband, as he helped himself to an olive, with more attention to that than to the discussion in hand. "But at my time of life a man prefers to die a natural death, and not to run the chance of being tomahawked in his bed."

Luckily the young people took this as a joke, and laughed; so that difficulty was got over. But when they had got as far as the sweets, the doomed man began again:

"By-the-bye, Bradfield," he asked casually, as he tried to make up his mind between orange-jelly and ice-pudding, "what's become of those two fellows who were out in the bush with you?"

"Don't know what two fellows you mean,"

answered Mr. Bradfield, in a tone which would have warned off any person less obtuse. "I met a good many fellows when I was out there."

By this time Mr. Graham-Shute had caught his wife's eye, seen her frowns, watched her agonised attempts to kick his foot under the table ; but he was as quietly obstinate in his way as she was loudly determined in hers, so he glared at her across the flowers, and persisted in his ill-advised remarks.

"Oh ! come, you must know. Two fellows who went out with you, or whom you met soon after you got out there, and chummed up with. Marrable—yes, Alfred Marrable was the name of the one, and——" Here he paused, trying to recollect the second name. "I can't remember the name of the other. What's become of them? What's become of Marrable?"

Mrs. Graham-Shute could hardly have been trusted alone with her husband with a weapon in her hand at that moment. For she saw that the rich cousin from whom so much was expected was looking as much displeased as only a sallow-faced and black-haired man can look. If William were going on like this, they might just as well settle at John-o'-Groat's as at Wyngham. John Bradfield no longer pretended, however, to have forgotten the existence of his old chums.

"Dead, I believe, both of them," he answered, curtly. "Did no good, either of them."

"And what was the name of the other man?"

"Don't remember."

William looked at him incredulously, though he could not go so far as to contradict him.

His wife rushed in to the rescue

"And what are we going to do to pass the time away between this and Friday?" she asked, with a great assumption of buoyancy and good spirits. "We ought to try to 'get up' something, ought we not?"

This question almost restored John Bradfield's good humour. It was so characteristic of his cousin Maude. She was always "getting up" something, always at short notice, and always badly. It was her custom to forget some one or other of the necessary preparations, and to leave the work to be done in the hands of others. But she liked the excitement, the glory of being the prime mover of everything, however small, the feeling that she was making herself talked about; above all, she liked the "fuss."

Lilith and Rose looked at each other. Their eyes said, "So like mamma!"

"All right, Maude," said her cousin, with restored good humour. "What shall it be? A sack race? Or distribution of buns to the oldest inhabitants? It's all the same to you, I suppose?"

It was her turn to look offended. She raised her head so far that her cousin could scarcely see more than the chins as she answered, in stately tones:

"Oh! of course, if I'm only to be laughed at, I withdraw the suggestion. But I thought, as we are in a beautiful house like this, where there is plenty of room and plenty of people to do everything, it seems a pity not to take advantage of it, and——"

"And get a line in the local paper," added her husband.

There was a laugh at this, subdued on the part of her daughters, boisterously loud from Donald, who had been enjoying his cousin's champagne immensely,

and bestowing more and more of his attention on the unresponsive Chris.

They all knew that her project, if she could yet be said to have anything so definite, was not nipped in the bud, but would spring up to its full growth at a not remote period. For the moment, however, Mrs. Graham-Shute said no more about it, but rather disdainfully gave to Mrs. Abercarne the signal for the ladies to retire, instead of waiting for that lady to give it to her.

CHAPTER XI.

AMATEUR CHARITY.

AS soon as the ladies were in the drawing-room, Mrs. Graham-Shute returned to her point. As her daughters, used to mamma's ways of "getting up" entertainments, were unsympathetic, and as Mrs. Abercarne was on her dignity, she was forced to pour out her proposals into the ear of Chris. Anxious to secure at least this one ally, she became very gracious to the girl.

"I'm sure you would be glad of some gaiety to vary the monotony of your life here," she said, with condescension. "Now, what do you say to *tableaux vivants*? I'm sure we might get some up by Thursday. This is only Monday, so we have three clear days."

"There would be a great deal to do in such a short time," said Chris. "And where would you have them?"

"Oh! in this room of course. It is beautifully

adapted for the purpose. There's the opening for the curtains between the two rooms, and a door to each, one for the audience, the other for the performers."

She was so enthusiastic that Chris felt quite sorry that she must destroy this charming arrangement by pointing out that the room was wanted for the ball on Friday night, and that there would be no time to put up a stage on Thursday and to take it down and re-arrange the room for the night after.

"Well, there must be some other room in a big place like this," said Mrs. Graham-Shute, still buoyantly. "Come, you set your wits to work to help me, like a dear girl, and I'm sure we shall manage something between us."

Chris began to see that she had better indulge her, as she would want something to keep her occupied during the next few days.

"There's a great place that was built for a barn, that was used for a school treat in the summer, I believe. It's down by the new stables, a quarter of a mile away. I don't know whether that would do. There are some tables and trestles piled up in one corner; perhaps they could be made into a stage."

"The very thing!" cried Mrs. Graham-Shute, enthusiastically. "I knew we should manage it somehow."

But Chris saw difficulties where her companion saw none.

"But you will want a lot of people, performers and spectators too," she objected. "And then, have you considered that there will be dresses to be made, and scenes to be rehearsed? There's a lot of work to be done to get *tableaux* up properly."

But to get a thing up properly was what Mrs. Graham-Shute never troubled to do. To get it up somehow was always the extreme limit of her ambition. She was already perfectly satisfied, and she proceeded at once to settle other details as summarily as the first.

"We will do fairy tales, I think," she said. "The dresses will be cheap and easily made. We can have the 'Sleeping Beauty,' with Lilith as Beauty, and 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Red Riding Hood,' and—and any of those things, don't you know? With all my cousin's curiosities and things we can make a lovely palace for the 'Sleeping Beauty.'"

Mrs. Abercarne had raised her double eye-glass, and was looking horror-struck at this suggested desecration.

Chris, with a frightened glance at her mother, hastened to say:

"But, then, the performers? Who would you have for the *tableaux*?"

"Oh, well, there must be some family in the neighbourhood quite used to such things. There always is, you know. I must ask my cousin John about that. I suppose you wouldn't know of anybody?"

"Well, there are the Brownes. Mr. Browne is a brewer, the head of the firm of Browne & Browne. It's a large family, and they can act, I believe."

"Then they will do beautifully," said Mrs. Graham-Shute, complacently. "We will have them just to fill up. They can play the pages and court ladies, and one of them can be the Wolf in 'Red Hiding Hood;' and another can black himself for Man Friday. Of course, Lilith, and Rose, and Donald will take the principal parts, for they want a little acting, you know.

People think it's only just to stand still, but really you have to be quite clever to do it really well. And now there's nothing left to decide but what's it to be for. Of course, it must be in aid of something. I must go and see the vicar's wife—if he has a wife—tomorrow, and settle that.”

“You don't mean to charge to see them, do you?” exclaimed Chris, in astonishment. “Done in such a hurry, would they be worth it?”

“Oh, people don't mind when it's for a charity,” answered the lady, breezily. “Besides, I'm sure they'll be very good. You will spare no pains in getting the dresses ready, and all the little etceteras, will you? I don't mind organizing these things a bit, but I must have a willing lieutenant to carry out the petty details,” she ended, with a smile.

Chris thought that upon the whole the “petty details” would be quite equal in value to the “organisation,” but all she said was :

“Of course, I will do all I can. But I'm afraid you will have to give up the idea of making a charge for admission. Mr. Bradfield would never allow it, I'm sure.”

Mrs. Graham-Shute, losing her good humour in a moment, looked at her with fishy eyes. Who was this girl that she should profess to know more than she did about her “cousin John?”

“Oh, that would take all the sense out of the thing altogether,” she said, coldly. “If any little thing should go wrong, the lights all go out, as happened once, I remember ; or the people be obliged to go on in their ordinary dress, as we had to do once for the murder of Rizzio, people can grumble or make fun of you if it's not for a charity. Young

people don't consider these things. I'm sure, if Mr. Bradfield doesn't like it much, he'll give way if I coax him."

Chris said nothing; and as the gentlemen came in at that moment, Mrs. Graham-Shute proceeded straightway to use her blandishments on her cousin.

"We're going to give *tableaux vivants* in the barn by the stables, John," she said, attacking him at once. "Miss Abercarne says we can make a lovely stage there with some trestles and things that are there already for us. And she says that the Brownes will play the smaller parts beautifully, and I'm going to see them about it to-morrow. And we're going to do the 'Sleeping Beauty.'"

"I've no objection. But if you must have a 'Beauty' picture, have 'Beauty and the Beast.' Of course Miss Abercarne will play Beauty, and I'll play the other chap."

Mrs. Graham-Shute's face fell.

"We had thought of making Lilith play Beauty; you see it wants some aptitude, and a little experience in these things to play an important part like Beauty. But, of course, if Miss Abercarne thinks she can do it better——"

"She can *look* it better, that's the point," interrupted Mr. Bradfield, with conviction. "The prettiest girl must play Beauty, and you can't deny that Miss Abercarne *is* the prettiest. Ask William."

Mrs. Graham-Shute agreed enthusiastically; and the girls, who were all three gathered round the piano, wondered what was amusing the gentlemen so much, and making mamma so angry. But it was at the suggestion of making a charge for admission that

John Bradfield put his foot down the most cruelly on his cousin's little plans. He would not hear of it. He was quite ready to pay them to come in, he said, if that should be necessary; but he could not think of allowing people who would be his guests on the following night, to pay for what was not worth paying for.

And Mrs. Graham - Shute had to swallow her mortification as best she could.

"Perhaps," she said, when she had mastered her vexation sufficiently to speak, "we had better give up the idea of having the *tableaux*, and think of something else. The time is very short, and if we are to have a lot of incompetent people in the principal parts, it will not, as you say, cousin John, be worth paying to see, or even seeing at all."

"But," said John Bradfield, who saw through the poor lady's little manoeuvres, and loved to tease her. "I won't have them given up. They will amuse you at any rate, and I want to see Miss Christina with her hair down. She'll have to wear it down as Beauty, won't she?"

Each word was making the poor lady more angry. She saw her husband laughing at her, and at last she could bear it no longer.

"Oh, if the affair is going to be spoilt in this way, I wash my hands of it. I thought it was to be kept in the family."

"What family? The Brownes?" cried John Bradfield, as he crossed the room and broke up the knot of girls. "Miss Christina, there's a difficulty about the part of Beauty. I'm sure you won't mind playing it, if I play the Beast, will you?"

Poor Chris grew crimson, and Lilith looked sur-

prised. It was her mother's fault that she had been taught to consider herself, not an ordinarily pretty girl, but a peerless beauty, with whom all other good-looking girls were out of the running.

"Mrs. Shute doesn't think you are clever enough to stand and be looked at, Miss Christina," he went on mischievously. "But I want you to vindicate your claims to intellect."

"On the contrary," interrupted his cousin in a shrill, offended tone, "I thought Miss Abercarne's talents would be wasted in such a trifling part. I thought she would like better to play the music. We must have a musical accompaniment."

"Yes, yes; I should like that much better," said poor Chris, who saw that she had been made the instrument for worrying the stout lady to the verge of apoplexy. "Make me of use in any way you like, as long as you don't want me to go on the stage."

And so the incident ended in a discussion of the dresses, and in choosing the subjects to be illustrated

CHAPTER XII.

AN ALARM.

THE next two days were days such as Mrs. Graham-Shute loved, full of bustle and confusion, and needless noise. She herself went out early in the morning to call upon the Brownes, and to enlist them in her service as foils to Lilith's charms. The Brownes saw through her motives, and discussed them among themselves in the frankest manner. But they were ready for any fun that might be going, as people in the country are, and at least they could go and laugh at her, which was the usual reason privately given for the acceptance of one of Mrs. Graham-Shute's invitations.

In the meantime, as she had shrewdly expected, all the real work was left to Chris, who had to search through old wardrobes, devise costumes, and decide upon all the arrangements necessary for transforming the deserted barn into a comfortable and draught-tight theatre. Here Mrs. Graham-Shute was too modest even to make a suggestion.

"I'm quite sure, my dear Miss Abercarne, that you are quite equal to seeing to all these little matters. Of course, I couldn't undertake to do *everything* myself."

So Mrs. Graham-Shute went to call upon the Brownes, while Chris and her mother worked and tired themselves out at home. As for Lilith and Rose, they simply washed their hands of the whole

affair, and contented themselves with begging Chris not to work so hard, and not to worry herself. "Mamma was always doing these things, and people were used to the way in which she did them." Lilith occupied herself solely with her own costumes, with which she required a great deal of help, and which she thought were the only things that anybody need trouble themselves about. Rose was completely apathetic, and made no offer of assistance; and she was of very little use when persuaded to lend a hand.

All this Chris would not have minded much if the attentions of Donald had not been the last straw. Having received encouragement from his mother, he pursued Chris all day long, getting in her way, and boring her so much, that, on the second afternoon, she was at last fain to get rid of him by sending him into the town to buy tapes and buttons.

Mr. Graham-Shute took refuge in the study, where he bored John Bradfield by talking politics, which his host hated.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when a knock at the study door was hailed by Mr. Bradfield as affording a hope of release.

"Come in!" cried he; and Stelfox entered.

Both the gentlemen saw at once, by the disturbed expression of the usually stolid face, that something had happened.

"Well, what is it?" asked his master testily.

The next moment, with a glance at Graham-Shute, Mr. Bradfield jumped up, and, making a step towards an inner door, which led into the library, made a sign to Stelfox to follow him.

But Mr. Graham-Shute's curiosity was roused.

"Eh—what? What, it's something about that

lunatic of yours, Bradfield, I'm sure!" he cried excitedly. "He has got into some mischief or other! I knew he would while I was here. What—what is it, Stelfox? Has the creature got away, or what?"

Stelfox nodded.

"That's it, sir," he said.

John Bradfield, who had reached the library door, reeled abruptly round.

"Got away—again? Good heavens!"

Mr. Graham-Shute was fidgetting nervously about the room. Stelfox stood like a rock.

"Then why—why on earth don't you go after him?" said Mr. Graham-Shute.

John Bradfield interrupted his querulous questions.

"When did you find it out, and what have you done?"

"I found it out a couple of hours ago, sir, and I've been hunting high and low ever since, and I've had some of the men helping me. Of course, it all had to be done on the quiet, so as not to frighten the ladies."

"Yes, for heaven's sake don't let my wife hear of it," moaned Mr. Graham-Shute, "or she'll give us twice as much trouble as any lunatic. Do you think he's anywhere about the house?"

Stelfox glanced at his master, who had turned deadly white at the suggestion.

"I don't think so, sir."

Mr. Bradfield appeared suddenly to rouse himself from the sort of stupefaction into which Stelfox's intelligence had thrown him. Crossing the room with quick steps, he picked out from a pile of canes

and weapons of various kinds which stood in one corner a heavy, loaded stick.

"We must lose no time," said he. "Have you any ideas as to which direction he will have taken?"

"No, sir. All I'm sure of is that he can't have got far. You see, sir, he can't meet anyone without their finding out that something's wrong with him, even if he should chance upon someone that doesn't know where he belongs to. No, sir; what I'm afraid of is, lest he should happen upon Miss Abercarne. After that day, and seeing what he did, he'd frighten her so dreadfully, sir."

"He mustn't meet her—he mustn't meet her on any account!" said John Bradfield with excitement, and he brought the end of his heavy stick down with force upon the ground.

"I hope you don't mean to brain the poor chap?" exclaimed Mr. Graham-Shute apprehensively.

"No. But unluckily there's a possibility of his braining the first person he meets. Do you know, Stelfox, whether he took anything which he could use as a weapon away with him?"

Stelfox hesitated a moment, and then answered:

"Well, sir, one leg of the mahogany table that stands in his sitting-room has been forced off. It looks as if he'd been preparing for this job, for it's clear he's been hacking away at the leg on the quiet for some time, so that at last he was able to wrench it off."

While he spoke, Mr. Bradfield was buttoning himself in his ulster. Stelfox went on:

"I can't quite make out now how he gave me the slip. The door was closed as usual. He must have picked the lock. He's as cunning as they make 'em, and

nobody would have guessed at breakfast time that there was anything up."

Mr. Bradfield, who was walking towards the front door, stopped suddenly.

"Where is Miss Christina now?" he asked.

Mr. Graham-Shute answered.

"She's up in the Chinese-room, sewing for this tomfoolery my wife's getting up."

"Mr. Donald has just gone up there with some things he's been buying for her in the town," added Stelfox.

"That's all right," said Mr. Graham-Shute. "He'll be hanging about there for the rest of the afternoon, so that if this poor fellow should get in there, she'll have someone to stand by her."

"Stelfox," said Mr. Bradfield as he left the house, "let somebody watch the door of the Chinese-room."

But this order was given too late. Chris had, indeed, been sewing upstairs, as Mr. Graham-Shute said, and Donald had returned from the town with his tapes and buttons. But several things had happened since then.

In the first place, Donald had wanted to make his return an opportunity of making love to Chris.

"Why, six pieces of tape! three reels of number forty! one packet of mixed needles! two boxes of pins! Mr. Shute, you're a genius! You haven't made a mistake!"

"I should have done if it had been for anybody but you," said Donald sentimentally. "But every word you say is engraved upon my heart. And don't call me Mr. Shute. Call me Donald."

"I'll call you anything you like if you won't tread

upon the nun's veiling, and if you leave off snipping the tape with my scissors," said Chris prosaically.

"How awfully sharp you are with a fellow. Aren't you nicer than that to *anybody*, Miss Christina?"

"Not when they interfere with my work."

"But you're *always* like this to me."

"Always! I have known you two days."

"And how long must you know me before you leave off snubbing me?"

"As long as you continue to behave as if I were a very silly girl, and you a very silly—*boy*, Mr. Shute."

"You think that's very cutting, I suppose? Do you happen to know how old I am, Miss Abercarne?"

"Oh, perhaps you're only extremely juvenile for your years; at any rate I should have thought you were too old to worry a girl at your mother's instigation."

Donald started, and grew crimson.

"I—I—I don't understand you, Miss Abercarne," he stammered, seating himself on the table, and stabbing the precious nun's veiling through and through with a bodkin which he had taken from a work-basket.

"Don't you?" said Chris calmly, as she set his teeth on edge by tearing a piece of calico. "Then, as I am quite sure you're not dull-witted, I can only suppose that you must think I am. For the past two days," she went on, as she tore off another strip of calico, "you have followed me about everywhere; and when you have not done it of your own accord, I have seen Mrs. Graham-Shute remind you by a nod or a look that you had to do so. Ah! ha!

You didn't think my eyes were so good as that, did you ? ”

Donald was redder than before, and furious with his mother, Chris, and himself. But then the boy peeped out in him, and he snatched away the calico just as she was about to tear it again.

“Don't do that, for goodness' sake ! ” said he, wincing. “Call me names, if you like, make me out a cad if you like, but don't set my teeth on edge ! ”

“I'm not going to call you names, or to make you out anything,” said Chris, blushing and laughing a little, and looking very pretty in the excitement of the skirmish. “But, of course, I can't help having my own opinion of your behaviour.”

“I don't care what your opinion is, you've no right to say such things ! ” cried Donald in a loud and dictatorial tone.

“I haven't said anything but that you followed me about because your mother told you to,” said Chris, looking up with a daring face.

“It isn't true ! It isn't true, it's a—a—well, it isn't true ! ” roared Donald.

“Yes, it is true, and I know why she does it, too ! ” she added in a defiant tone, but with burning cheeks. “And I can tell you that both you and she are wasting your time ; for I'm not going to do the thing you're both so much afraid of. And if I *were* going to do it,” she added, with spirit, “nothing you and she could do would prevent me.”

For a moment Donald was struck dumb. He was not only astonished, but he was filled with admiration. He liked the girl's “pluck,” and she looked “jolly pretty.”

"And w-w-what's that?" he stammered almost meekly.

"Why," said Chris, becoming redder than ever, and looking at him half-shyly, half-defiantly, "why, marry Mr. Bradfield!"

By this time Donald had given up all thoughts of contradicting her. Where was the use? So he sat down again upon the table, and stared at her stupidly.

"Oh!" said he at last in a feeble manner, and in a tone of reflection—"oh! so that's what you think, is it?"

"Yes, and what I think further is that you're both very silly."

"By Jove!" said Donald softly, "I think we are!"

"And as you agree with me so entirely upon this point," said Chris, as she skipped over the piles of material which lay on the floor, and made for the door, "you won't be surprised when I tell you that if you dare to come and worry me any more, I shall tell Mr. Bradfield. And perhaps you know whether you would like that!"

With which tremendous menace, Chris gave him a little curt bow, and ran quickly out of the room, leaving him in a state of stupefaction.

Half-way along the corridor Chris slackened her steps. It began to dawn upon her that she had just managed to put herself in a very uncomfortable position. She had, she thought, probably succeeded in freeing herself from the attentions of the boisterous hobbledohoy who had been pursuing her. But if, as she judged most likely, he should confide to his mother the details of the interview just passed, Mrs. Graham-Shute's indignation would be so great, that

she would certainly vent some of it on the girl who had "insulted" her son. With this unpleasant idea in her mind, Chris went down to the drawing-room very soberly.

The moment she entered she was seized upon by Mrs. Graham-Shute.

"Oh, Miss Abercarne," began that lady in an injured tone, "you've forgotten all about the music. Don't you know that the performance is to take place to-morrow, and that it doesn't do to leave everything to the last?"

Chris was not in the humour to be bullied by Mrs. Graham-Shute for that lady's own neglect.

"I hadn't forgotten the music, Mrs. Shute," she said. "But I hadn't been asked to arrange it, and I should not have taken the matter upon myself, even if, with the costumes to make, I had had time."

"Oh, well, somebody must see to it. I'm getting this affair up for other people's pleasure, and I expect to be helped."

"If you will settle upon the music you want played, I am quite ready to play it," said Chris rather shortly.

It was certainly not for Miss Abercarne's pleasure that Mrs. Graham-Shute was getting up the entertainment, but she spoke as if she had no other object in view.

At that moment the door opened, and Donald came in. He did not see Chris, who was standing in the embrasure formed by the big bay-window which looked out to the west. Donald slouched up to his mother with his usual heavy tread.

"Mother," he said, "I want to speak to you."

Mrs. Graham-Shute turned towards him, and Chris

slipped quickly out of the corner she was in, passed round the two, and crossed the room to the door.

"Wait a minute, Miss Abercarne," said Mrs. Graham-Shute peremptorily, catching sight of Chris when the girl's hand was on the door.

But Chris took no notice. She had been running about and tiring herself out for that lady for two days, and now at last she rebelled. She saw Donald start and turn round, and that was another reason why she felt that she must make her escape. She had had enough of Graham-Shutes for the present; and as they could find her as long as she was in the house, she pulled out a cloak from a box-ottoman in the hall, took from a peg in the outer hall a lantern which always hung there, lit the candle in it, and escaped out of the house. She would go and see how the work of erecting the stage in the barn was getting on.

She had to cross the park by a path which led alongside a plantation to the group of new buildings, erected by Mr. Bradfield, which consisted of the stables and some farm-buildings, one of which was the great barn. The key had been left in the lock, so she got in without difficulty. It was quite dark inside, and apparently deserted. Raising her lantern high above her head, Chris saw that the men had finished the work of erecting the stage, and that they had all left the building.

While she still stood by the door, she heard Donald's voice whistling to one of the dogs. She did not want him to find her here, and to inflict upon her another "scene." So she shut the great door very softly, first taking the key from the outside, and replacing it on the inside. And when she had shut it, she turned the key softly in the lock.

"Now," she thought to herself, "if he should think of trying the door, he will find it locked, think the place empty, and pass on."

With a sigh of relief to think that she had gained half an hour's peace, Chris crossed the wide barn floor, and examined the stage. It had been very well put up, and was firm to the tread. For she tried it herself, putting her lantern down on one corner of the stage while she did so.

She tried a step or two, but stopped suddenly, hearing something behind her which was not the creaking of a board. She looked round quickly, but saw nothing except the bare brick walls, and the forms still piled in one corner. So she turned round again to face the imaginary audience.

To her horror, she found that she had a real one.

A man, evidently from his stealthy walk a man with some purpose which was not honest, was sliding rapidly along the walls towards the door. Chris dropped her skirt, and held her breath. Was he going out, afraid of being discovered? In this case she made up her mind to pretend not to see him.

To her horror he gained the door by a last step, which was like the bound of a wild beast, and took the key out of the lock.

Chris sprang from the stage to the floor, uncertain what to do until she knew who this was, and what his purpose might be. But with a sudden notion that this was a thief, who meant to assault and rob her, she turned towards the lantern, thinking she could elude him better in the dark.

But the man divined her attention, and sprang across the floor with leaps and bounds, uttering discordant and frantic cries.

For one moment Chris was paralysed with horror, and could not move; and of that one moment the man took advantage to snatch up the lantern, and turn its full light upon her.

Then she stood transfixed, looking at his great wild eyes in the obscurity, and clasping her hands.

For it was the lunatic from the east wing!

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. RICHARD SURPRISES CHRIS.

AT the first moment of finding herself alone with the madman, Chris gave herself up for lost; for he carried in his hand a formidable weapon—the table leg with which he had provided himself before leaving his rooms. He did not, however, brandish it in the air, and then bring it down upon her head, as, in the first impulse of terror, she had fully expected.

So paralysed with fright was she, indeed, that she shut her eyes, flinching under the expected blow, For she was standing with her back against the little stage, with him in front of her, so that escape seemed out of the question.

As the blow did not come, she opened her eyes and looked up; and involuntarily, at the sight of Mr. Richard's face, she uttered an exclamation.

For he did not look ferocious or frenzied. He was regarding her with just the expression of surprise and shy admiration which she might have seen on the face of any other man of her acquaintance in the circumstances. The only difference was that he did

not, as another man would have done, make any apologies. He stood looking at Chris as if she had been a divinity; and she began to hope that she would be able to persuade him, with very little trouble, to let her out. Indeed, if it had not been for her vivid remembrance of the paroxysm of rage into which she had seen him fall, on the occasion when he had flung a missile at her through the window, she would have been absolutely without any fear of him at all, so greatly did his melancholy face and gentle manners outweigh with her the reports of his violence. He was so quiet, that for her to assume a conciliatory manner was easy.

"May I have my lantern, please?" she asked, holding out her hand, and still keeping her eyes rather watchfully fixed upon his face.

But he did not understand her, although he looked eagerly into her face, as if trying to do so. Chris began to feel more nervous. She looked towards the door and tried again.

"Won't you, please, unlock the door, and let me go out?" she said, emphasising her request by shyly touching the great key which was swinging from his hand by the piece of rough string attached to its handle.

To her great relief, his face lighted up, and he nodded. She began instantly to move in the direction of the great barn door, and he followed her very quietly. She had just fear enough left, on hearing his footsteps behind her, to turn and wait for him, so that he might walk by her side. This, however, rendered their progress very slow, for he moved with such languid or unwilling steps, that it seemed to her half an hour before they reached the end of the barn.

The attempts at conversation which she made to relieve the awkwardness of the situation were, however, not very successful.

The first remark she made, which was upon the weather, elicited no reply whatever from Mr. Richard. Then she turned towards him, and asked in very distinct and deliberate tones whether he had ever been in the barn before. She thought he seemed to understand the question, and that the shake of the head he gave was his answer. But still he uttered no word.

When they had come near the door, Mr. Richard stumbled, his feet having been caught in a tangle of old rope and sacking which lay upon the floor. The key fell from his hand. He did not appear to notice this, however, although Chris heard the loud clang with which it touched the brick floor.

"You have dropped the key," she said, as he walked on.

As he took no notice still, she went down on her knees, groping among the rubbish with which the place was strewn. He turned, and seemed to look at her with surprise. But he did not ask her what she was looking for.

"It's the key. Don't you see you have dropped the key?" she cried, her alarm again roused by this apparently wilful obtuseness. "Please let me have the lantern one moment."

To her horror, he began to utter the strange sounds which she had sometimes heard issuing from the east wing, and she was so much shocked, that she instinctively put up her hands to her ears, while her face assumed an expression of the utmost terror. Then Mr. Richard fell into sudden silence. For a few

seconds he stood looking at her as she knelt on the ground; then he seated himself on an empty wine-case which was among the lumber, put his head in his hands, and heaved a deep sigh.

At that moment, Chris caught sight of the key, which had fallen behind a little heap of tins which had once contained tobacco. In snatching it up she knocked it against one of the tins, making a great clatter. But the noise appeared not to disturb the madman, who did not even look up when Chris rose to her feet, although she trod on some ends of board and set them rattling. She feared he was only pretending to be unobservant, and that she should not be able to get to the door before he made the attack upon her which his mysterious conduct led her to expect.

She must, however, make the attempt and trust to her luck. She began by taking two or three cautious steps; and then, when she was close to him, she set off at a run. But she had hardly done so when he started up and, uttering another of the weird cries which so much alarmed her, came in pursuit, and reached the door as soon as she did.

Not all her self-command could help poor Chris to stifle the scream which she had suppressed before. And then, remembering that after all her screams were her best chance of escape, as the stable was so near that one of the men might hear them, she put her mouth to the keyhole of the door, and called loudly for help.

At once Mr. Richard put his hand over her mouth. For a moment she could not move, she could not even try to cry out again. Remembering his savage fury on the day when he had thrown the goblet out

of the window, she gave herself up for lost, believing that he would dash her down senseless upon the hard floor. For a long time, as it seemed to her, though it was really the work of a few seconds, he kept one hand upon her mouth, and held both her hands with the other. He uttered from time to time a curious sound, which was more like a low moan of distress than a cry of fury, and though he held her so that it was impossible for her to escape, she could not even fancy that he hurt her.

Her first impulse had been to shut her eyes; but when she found that she had so far come to no harm in the hands of the lunatic, she ventured to open them, and was instantly struck by the expression of his face, which was infinitely sad, infinitely wistful, but absolutely mild and kind.

In the position in which they stood, he could see the door of the barn, while she could not. She had had only just time to realise that Mr. Richard had no present intention of harming her, when she saw his eyes glance quickly from her face to the door, while at the same time she heard a slight noise behind her.

The next instant she found herself free, and looking round quickly to find out the reason of this, she saw Mr. Bradfield's face just as he, after looking in at the door, withdrew his head quickly.

With another of the ear-piercing cries which could only proceed from a madman, Mr. Richard rushed to the door, which was locked on the other side before he could reach it. He hurled himself against the door, then turned quickly to Chris, and took the key from her hand. He did not do it roughly, however, even in his excitement, but gave her a deprecatory look, as if asking her permission

Then it came into the girl's mind, by an extraordinary flash of inspiration, born of intense excitement, that she had some power over this wild and dangerous man, and that this was a time to use it. She seemed to see in the same moment, first that he wanted to do some harm to Mr. Bradfield, and secondly, that her influence might be able to dissuade him from his purpose. So she put out her hand again for the key, as she ran after him to the door. He was already trying to put it into the lock.

"No, no!" she said eagerly, looking up into his face with eyes which looked sweet in their pleading even by the weak light of the lantern which he had snatched up again from the floor. "No. You are not to try to hurt Mr. Bradfield. Now promise me you won't. Please, please promise!"

The effect of her entreaty was instantaneous. Mr Richard's hand fell down by his side; the expression of his face changed from one of fierce excitement to one of pleasure, and even of tenderness. Still he said no word; and Chris, perplexed and rendered shy by his abrupt change of manner, drew back a step, and looked down. With the key in the door, she was no longer afraid. Besides, had not Mr. Bradfield seen her? And although he had most unaccountably refrained from at once releasing her from her perilous *tête-à-tête* with the madman, he would surely send some one else to do so, if he was too much afraid of Mr. Richard to do it himself.

Not that she was in any hurry to be released. She could not help taking a strong interest in this unhappy man, who, even in his mad frenzy, stopped short of harming her, nay, even became gentle, in the midst of

his tury, at a word from her. Believing as she did, that more might be done for him than had been done, in the way of lifting the cloud which hung over his mind, she began to ask herself, as she stood there, whether it would not be possible for her to help him to escape from the confinement in which he was kept, to some place where he would have the medical supervision which she was sure that his case demanded. As this thought crossed her mind, she glanced up again at Mr. Richard, who was leaning against the wall, and looking at her with eyes in which it seemed to her that there was every moment less of madness and more of an emotion which it touched while it alarmed her to see there. She instantly made up her mind to try and help him.

Approaching him with some shyness, and taking care, without appearing to do so, to keep the door well in sight, she asked, in a gentle and persuasive voice, speaking in a very slow and deliberate manner, so that he might understand her :

"Will you tell me, Mr. Richard, have you any friends you wish to go to?"

He watched her face intently, and she felt sure that he understood her perfectly. A look of deeper sadness came into his face as he shook his head.

"Why, then, do you want to escape?"

Although he said nothing in answer, Chris thought he understood this question also. For his face, which was singularly expressive, instantly clouded with a dark and angry look. It occurred to Chris that the objects of his anger were the people who kept him in confinement. She knew that mad people are credited with this feeling, and, indeed, Mr. Richard had given very strong proofs of it.

Being rather alarmed, in spite of herself, by the sudden change which came over his face at her last question, she drew back a step, turning towards the door. He followed her, and took her left hand, which was nearest to him, very gently in his, and by a little gesture, eloquent, though silent, entreated her not to go yet. Chris began to tremble, not with fear, but with pity. The expression of this poor fellow seemed to her one of eloquent entreaty. Knowing, as she did, that he would soon be back in the gloomy confinement of the east wing, she had not the heart to leave him, as she rightly judged that he would have let her do, if she had insisted.

Still, deep as one's sympathy may be, it is an embarrassing thing to find oneself locked up with a madman, and Chris found it hard to make conversation for a person who never replied to her, except by nods and shakings of the head, or by puzzled signs that she was not understood.

In this dilemma, she could not but be glad when at last she heard footsteps outside. After trying the door, and finding it locked from within, the newcomer having provided himself with a ladder from the stables, entered the hay-loft at the top of the barn, and put his face through the trap above their heads.

It was Stelfox.

At the sight of this man, Mr. Richard made at once for the door. But Stelfox came down the ladder which led from the loft with surprising agility, and seizing the gentleman by the arm, proceeded to struggle with him. But Mr. Richard was more than his match, and he threw Stelfox off, and again made for the door.

"Stop him, miss. For his own sake, stop him if you can," cried Stelfox to Chris, who was standing near the door, watching the struggle with much anxiety.

She at once ran forward and lightly put her hand on Mr. Richard's arm. As Stelfox had expected, this was enough. It gave him time to approach Mr. Richard from behind, to seize his arms, and to bind them together in such a way that the madman was helpless.

CHAPTER XIV

STELFOX IS RETICENT.

CHRIS burst into tears.

It seemed to her as if she had betrayed him into the hands of his enemies, and she sobbed out :

"Oh, let him go ! let him go ! What have you made me do ?"

And all the time that she was speaking and drying her tears, Mr. Richard, without showing any anger at his capture, kept his mild eyes fixed upon her. When she looked up at him, with entreaties for forgiveness in her face, he smiled quite kindly at her and stood still, while Stelfox, keeping his hand upon his prisoner, explained :

"It's better for him to go home quietly with me than for him to be brought back with a bad cold, and without more consideration for his feelings than if he was a carted deer, at five o'clock in the morning."

But Chris was not satisfied, although Mr. Richard himself seemed reconciled to his fate. Then Stelfox

went on, exactly as if Mr. Richard had not been present:

"I'll tell you what you can do, miss, if you feel so sorry for him. Ask him to come back with you to the house and he will do so without any trouble."

Chris was reluctant to do this for several reasons.

"But he won't understand," she said, softly, turning so that Mr. Richard should not hear.

Stelfox's straight mouth lengthened into a smile.

"Just you try him, miss," said he.

So Chris turned again to the silent man.

"Will you come back with me to the house?" she asked, with a gesture in the direction of the mansion.

His face lighted up at once, and as Stelfox freed his arm he turned and walked beside her along the path through the meadow. They went in silence, for although Chris was so full of pity and of sympathy that she longed to express her feelings in some way, his silence made intercourse difficult. When they reached the gate into the garden, Stelfox came up to them.

"You had better go on by yourself, miss, now," said he.

It was evident that Mr. Richard understood this too, for his face clouded.

Chris held out her hand to him with a smile. He took it in both his and held it for some seconds, while his wistful eyes gazed upon her face with a look of despair which touched her to the quick.

When she had withdrawn her hand and run along the path for a few paces, she heard again the weird, harsh sounds which seemed the only form of speech of which the poor fellow was capable. Glancing round, she saw that he was engaged in some sort of

altercation with Stelfox over which he was getting very much excited. A few moments after, Stelfox left him and ran up to her.

"The poor young gentleman is in a great way, miss," he said, "because he's afraid he won't see you again."

Chris drew a sharp breath. This very thought had been troubling her.

"*Can* I see him again, Stelfox?" she asked, almost eagerly. "Would Mr. Bradfield allow it?"

One of the dry smiles peculiar to Stelfox for a moment expanded his features without brightening them.

"Maybe we won't trouble him by enquiring, miss," he said; "but if you would care to see Mr. Richard again, though he isn't much of a companion for a young lady, I'm afraid, I could manage it. And I can warrant he won't hurt you."

"Oh, no, I'm sure of that! I wasn't thinking of that!"

"It will be a great kindness, miss, if you're not afraid," said Stelfox, almost gratefully.

But Chris was looking in perplexity back in the direction of Mr. Richard, who was waiting as quietly as possible by the gate.

"Tell me one thing," said Chris in a puzzled tone. "No, I mean tell me half-a-dozen things."

Stelfox seemed to draw back into himself at her words.

"Won't it do another time, miss, please?" said he, respectfully. "Mr. Richard's there waiting for me, and he might——"

"Oh, no, you're not afraid of his running away now; that's one of the curious things in the case.

And another is that you can trust him not to hurt anybody, although I have myself seen him try to do so. And how is it that he seems to understand what one says at one time and that the next moment one may say something to him of which he won't take the least notice? And why does he make those dreadful noises, and yet be able to make you understand what he means? It doesn't sound like a language that he talks at all; but is it?"

Stelfox's face had become a discreet blank.

"Yes, it's a foreign language, miss. One of the South African languages, I believe. You see, he was born and brought up in South Africa, and being as he is, not quite like other folks, he hasn't been able to pick up English yet, but I manage to make him out, through being with him so much."

Chris smiled a little as she turned to go into the house.

"Thank you very much for your explanation, Stelfox," she said, "even though I know it isn't true."

She thought she heard a dry chuckle behind her as she went up the steps.

Chris was more excited than she had ever been before in her life. She did not quite understand the nature of the emotions which seemed to be waging war upon one another within her.

Chris was going upstairs, when, as she passed the study door, it flew open as if by a spring, and disclosed Mr. Bradfield, looking rather ashamed of himself. He wanted to find out whether she had seen him at the barn-door, and he hoped she had not. Chris, on the other hand, was feeling both hurt and surprised at his having left her with the madman, instead of coming

to her rescue. While she had laughed at her mother for thinking Mr. Bradfield must be honest because he was rough, she had herself on the same grounds, thought he must be courageous.

"Well, what have you been doing with yourself this afternoon?" asked he, in a jocular tone, under which she thought she detected some uneasiness.

"Since I saw you last, Mr. Bradfield?" asked Chris, demurely; "at the door of the barn?"

"Yes, yes," said he, hastily; "at least, since that, and before that—all the afternoon, I mean?"

"First I worked in the Chinese-room, making the dresses for to-morrow night," began Chris.

"Oh! that tomfoolery," interrupted Mr. Bradfield. "I wouldn't have anything to do with it if I were you. Everything will go wrong, and all the blame will be put on to your shoulders. I know my gushing cousin—and her methods!"

"I can't get out of it now, even if I wanted to," said she, rather ruefully. "I don't feel myself that there will be much glory accruing to us from the entertainment."

"Glory? I should think not. I'm going to be miles away myself."

"Oh! Mr. Bradfield, do you mean that? They'll all be dreadfully disappointed."

"Can't help that. Business must be considered before *pleasure*, you know," he added, drily.

Both were talking, as it were, to fill up the time until they were ready for attack and defence on the subject which was occupying the minds of both. Then, as Chris moved as if to go on her way upstairs, Mr. Bradfield came out of his study, and shut the door.

"I've bought a new picture," said he, as he invited her by gesture to accompany him to the dining-room, "by one of these French fellows. Very high art; gives one the creeps."

Before they stood in front of the picture, which was one of those heart-breaking war-pictures, tired soldiers trudging along under grey, wet skies, which form part of the legacy of the Franco-Prussian war, each knew that the tussle was coming.

"You take an encounter with a madman very philosophically, Miss Christina," said he.

"Not more philosophically than you did, Mr. Bradfield, when you looked into the barn, and left me there with him!" cried she.

He was rather disconcerted by this retort.

"Oh—er—well," he began, "you see, I could not quite make out, from where I was, who was with him, and——"

"And you knew, of course, what I did not, that he would not do me any harm."

Mr. Bradfield seemed to find this difficult to answer. It was not until after a minute's reflection of an apparently unpleasant kind that he said, rather shortly:

"I could see that he was not in one of his frenzied fits, and I thought it best to go away quickly while the quiet mood lasted, and send Stelfox, who knows how to manage him. Surely you don't suppose I should have left you alone with him if I had thought it likely he would do you any harm?"

"No, I don't suppose so. Only——"

"Only what?"

"I can hardly believe that he is ever so very dangerous. I can't help thinking he would be better

if he were allowed to come out sometimes and see people. Do you know, I think I should go mad myself if I lived in two rooms, and never saw anybody but Stelfox !”

Chris hurried out this speech hastily, regardless of the evident fact that the subject was extremely distasteful to Mr. Bradfield, who walked up and down the room impatiently, with his hands behind him, and repeatedly looked at his watch, as if he could hardly spare the time to listen to such nonsense. When she had finished, he said, shortly :

“I am afraid you must allow me to know best. My knowledge of him dates from many years back, you see, while yours is of the slightest possible kind. But you yourself saw him in one of his fits, when he threw something at you through the window. Do you want better proof than that of his dangerous temper? And do you think a person who is born without intelligence enough to learn to speak is fit to be trusted among other human beings?”

“Never learned to speak !” echoed Chris, doubtfully. “Stelfox said it was an African language he talked !”

Angry as he was, Mr. Bradfield burst into an uncontrollable laugh at this. Then, at once recovering his gravity, he said quickly :

“Stelfox is an old woman ! Never mind what he says. When you want to know anything, come to me.”

“I want to know something now, Mr. Bradfield, please.”

“Well, what is it ?”

“Whether my mother has told you I’m going to be a hospital nurse ?”

"A what?"

"A nurse at one of the London hospitals."

"What on earth do you want to do that for?"

She hesitated a little before replying, in some embarrassment:

"Well, you see, in spite of all your kindness, it is rather a difficult position for me here, isn't it? Or rather, it isn't any position at all. I'm not a servant, and I'm not a visitor, and I'm not a daughter of the house, but I'm treated as all three——"

"Who treats you as a servant?" interrupted Mr. Bradfield, angrily. "At least, you needn't tell me. Of course it's my pretentious old porpoise of a cousin! I'll give her a talking-to she won't forget in a hurry! But why do you trouble your head about the maunderings of a snob?"

"I don't trouble my head more about her treatment than about yours, Mr. Bradfield," answered Chris, smiling. "I shouldn't mind being a parlour-maid here at all. Your parlour-maids have rather a good time of it, I think. And I shouldn't mind being a visitor, nor a daughter; but a combination of the duties of all three is too much for one pair of feminine hands, and one simple feminine understanding."

"Oh! And who's to take care of my china when you're gone?"

"Miss Graham-Shute."

"Which one?"

"Rose. Mrs. Graham-Shute says dusting would spoil the shape of Lilith's hands."

"And who is to play the piano in the evenings?"

"Oh, Mrs. Shute herself could do that."

Mr. Bradfield groaned.

"Shade of Instruction-book Hamilton! What has the piano done that it should be exposed to that?" he exclaimed. Then, turning to Chris with a frown, he went on, "You say I have been kind to you. Well, don't you know that you are here to protect me from these people? I told you so when you first came."

"But you didn't quite mean it! You like them really, or you wouldn't have asked them to spend Christmas with you!"

"I like them—in moderation. But now the old lady has made up her mind to settle down here, I see that I'm in for too much of a good thing. I shall have to forbid them the house, or they will be in and out like rabbits all day long."

"You won't be too rigorous, will you? For the sake of the poor girls?"

"You like the girls, then?"

"I'm sorry for them. One is rather spoilt, the other is rather down-trodden."

"And the son? He's been making love to you, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"You take it very coolly. Has he asked you to marry him?"

Chris laughed.

"Why, no, Mr. Bradfield. He's only a boy, and I've only known him two days!"

Mr. Bradfield glanced at her, looked away quickly, took up his stand on the hearth-rug, and drummed on his chin with his fingers.

Chris looked at the door, and hoped he would let her go. She had an idea what these signs might portend.

"It wouldn't surprise me now," he began, in a rather nervous tone, "to hear of a man wanting to marry you when he had only known you two days. But it would surprise me," he went on, with a little awkward laugh, "to hear that he had plucked up courage to ask you."

Before he had reached the last word, Chris was at the door. But Mr. Bradfield reached it nearly as soon as she.

"No, no, I want to ask you a question before you go. Tell me, you've had offers of marriage made to you before now, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes, I have, but—but I don't like them; I don't like them at all. It's very unpleasant, you know," she went on rapidly, looking anywhere but at him, "to have to say things people don't want to hear."

"Well, I suppose," said Mr. Bradfield, who was not to be put off now that he had strung himself up to the required pitch, "the man will come some day to receive an answer which is not unpleasant?"

Chris shook her head doubtfully.

"Perhaps. I don't know."

"You say you've had plenty of offers?"

"I didn't say that. I said I had had some."

"Any from men like—like me?"

Chris glanced at him quickly, and shook her head with a little smile, half demure, half mischievous. She answered decidedly:

"No, not at all like you. In the first place, they hadn't any of them sixpence; in the second place, they were mostly boys, at least what I call boys," she added, in a tone of patronage.

This delighted Mr. Bradfield. Nobody could reproach him with being a boy.

"And you didn't care for any of them?"

"Oh, yes, I did. For some of them. In a way."

"Well, do you think you could ever care for me—in a way, in any way?"

Chris did not want to be unkind, but she shook her head decidedly.

"Oh, Mr. Bradfield, what do you want to ask me for? I couldn't help seeing you were going to, you know, and I've been trying to put off the e—I mean, I've been trying to stave it off. I wanted you to see it was no use, and that's one of the reasons why I wanted to go away and be a hospital nurse. So it isn't my fault, really."

"No, it's my misfortune," said Mr. Bradfield, shortly. "But I think you're very silly."

"Yes, and my mother will think so too, that's the worst of it," said Chris, ruefully.

"And don't you think the opinion of two people like your mother and me is worth more than yours?" asked Mr. Bradfield, good-humouredly.

Chris, though she was glad that he was not angry, did not like the way in which he took her refusal. For he treated it as a joke, as a matter of no consequence, and he stood very close to her, and stared at her, as she told her mother afterwards, in a way she did not like. This manner of receiving her answer piqued her, while it perhaps frightened her a little.

"I think my opinion is worth the most," she answered, with the colour rising in her cheeks, "for I can act upon mine, while you can't act upon yours."

Mr. Bradfield drew back a little way, amused, surprised, and pleased at her spirit.

"You're not afraid of being married against your will, then?"

At this rather ironically put question, the very soul of pretty Chris seemed to flash through her eyes.

"No, indeed I'm not."

Then Mr. Bradfield, who had lost his nervousness, and who went about his wooing with a will now that he had fairly started, changed his tone. In a voice which had become surprisingly tender—or which perhaps only sounded tender because he did not shout so much as usual—he said——

"Wouldn't you like to make a man happy, little Chris?"

She was too womanly to hear this speech quite unmoved, even from a man she did not care about. So she evaded it.

"I don't think a woman can make a man happy," she said.

"I don't think every woman could. But I'm sure you could; at least, you could make *me* happy."

"Well, if I really have the power of giving happiness, which I very much doubt," said Chris, laughing, "I think I ought to exercise it on some man who hasn't so many sources of happiness as you have already, Mr. Bradfield."

"Sources of happiness," echoed he scoffingly. "And, pray, what are they?"

"You have your collection, your curiosities, your pictures, your first editions!"

"All sources of torment, not of happiness. I can honestly say that I suffer more if I find that old

General Wadham has a duplicate of anything I buy, than I should rejoice over the discovery of a new and genuine Raphael. I buy, I collect, to pass away the time."

"But you can do so much good, and give so much pleasure. Doesn't that make you happy?"

"Not a bit."

"Yet you are very kind-hearted. You give away a great deal in charity," objected Chris, incredulously. "It makes you happy to help the poor and needy," she ended, feeling that she was talking rather like a tract.

"No, it doesn't. I help 'em to get rid of 'em!" rejoined Mr. Bradfield, tartly. "I hate the poor and needy. I've been poor and needy myself, and," he wound up with a sudden viciousness in his tone, "I know just how they feel towards me, because I remember how I used to feel towards anyone better off than myself."

Chris was almost frightened. For Mr. Bradfield's private feelings had, for the moment, run away with him, and he showed the girl, unconsciously, into a dark corner of his mind, which it would have been better for him to have kept hidden while his wooing lasted. She felt as if she had overheard something not intended for her ear, and it was almost with the manner of an eavesdropper who has been caught in the act, that she moved towards the door. She had long since lost the position she had taken up by it, having been followed up by her unwanted admirer, until she was back again by the fireplace. He seemed to become aware of her intention to escape quite suddenly, but he had apparently lost the wish to detain her

As she opened the door, he only called out——

“Good-bye, Miss Christina. But mind, I shall make you give me another answer by-and-by.”

Chris pretended not to hear.



CHAPTER XV.

THE HANDSOME STRANGER.

CHRIS went upstairs feeling uncomfortable and unhappy. Instead of opening a way out of the awkward position in which, as she had truly said, she found herself now that the Graham-Shutes had come down, she had drawn upon herself a proposal which had served only to complicate the situation. She had settled nothing, moreover. Mr. Bradfield had treated her suggestion of going away in the lightest manner, and she could scarcely doubt that his persuasions would be successfully exercised upon her mother, who was already strongly averse from the idea of her daughter's departure. She knew also that her mother would be disappointed to hear that she had not given more encouragement to Mr. Bradfield's hopes of marrying her. These thoughts all troubled her, but there was one other which distressed her still more, the remembrance of the unhappy madman, whose treatment at the hands of Mr. Bradfield and of Stelfox was as perplexing to her as his own conduct.

Everything in connection with Mr. Richard was a puzzle. She had herself witnessed one of his fits of fury, culminating in savage violence, and yet Mr. Bradfield, whose regard for her she could not help

knowing to be real, had left her alone with him in the barn. She remembered seeing Stelfox come breathless, panting and disordered out of the east wing after a struggle with his charge, and yet he had scoffed at the notion that Mr. Richard would do her any harm, and had even offered to let her meet him again.

Mr. Richard's own conduct was more bewildering still. At one moment he would seem to understand everything she said, the next he would pay no attention whatever to her words. For a little while he would be silent and perfectly gentle, then he would begin to frighten her by curious moans and incoherent sounds. Neither of the explanations offered was a satisfactory one. Stelfox had said that the language he talked was a South African one, but at the idea of this Mr. Bradfield had burst into uncontrollable laughter. His own explanation that Mr. Richard had not enough intelligence to pick up even the rudiments of speech, was more incredible still. The girl's experience of madness in any form was very slight, but she had never heard of any idiot or lunatic who was not able to talk at all, and whatever his mental deficiencies in certain directions might be, whatever mania he might be suffering from, it was clear to Chris he was far from being utterly devoid of intelligence.

Rather luckily, so Chris thought a little later, Mrs. Abercarne was not upstairs, for the girl thus had an opportunity of thinking the events of the afternoon over carefully before she saw her mother, and decided not to mention any of them. Poor Mrs. Abercarne had quite enough to worry her, not only in accommodating the housekeeping arrangements to Mrs.

Graham-Shute's erratic habits and projects, but in parrying that lady's persistent attempts to cast slights upon her and her daughter. If now she were to hear, all in one breath, as it were, of her daughter's encounter with the madman, of her quarrel with "that most objectionable young person," Donald, and her refusal of the rich Mr. Bradfield's attentions, Chris felt that her poor mother would spend a Christmas even less merry than she expected to do.

So the girl kept her little secrets to herself, which proved easy enough to do, as the preparations for the *tableaux* kept her fully employed, and away from her mother.

The following day was a long, confused nightmare to Chris. The din of Mrs. Graham-Shute's voice was in her ears all the morning, and until the time when the hastily-summoned guests began to arrive.

They had been invited for four, with a promise of tea. This, not being within the jurisdiction of Mrs. Graham-Shute, duly came to hand. The *tableaux* did not. So the guests "stood about," cold, bored, and critical, and waited. They had assembled in the drawing-room, whence Mrs. Graham-Shute, at the last moment, had had most of the chairs removed to the barn, with a sudden and unnecessary spasm of fear that there would not be seats enough for the audience.

Mr. Bradfield, in whose name the invitations had been issued, was "not at home," in his study. Mrs. Abercarne, whom he desired to play the part of hostess, was completely overshadowed by Mrs. Graham-Shute, who not only occupied a good deal of

space, and made her voice resound to the furthest extremities of the rooms, but who had a way of looking over the heads of the assembly as if she was counting her flock, which suggested to the meanest intelligence that she considered them all to be for the time being her property.

Mrs. Abercarne, seeing that the message summoning the company to the barn tarried in its coming, ordered some chairs to be brought in from the dining-room, since people who are cold and shy and bored look more comfortable sitting than they do standing. Mrs. Graham-Shute countermanded the order.

So the guests continued to stand, and to try to talk, and to wonder whether the fat and fussy lady was in her right mind.

Even Mrs. Graham-Shute, happy as she was in the consciousness that she was doing "the right thing," began to get rather "fidgety," and to send messages to the performers to know whether they were ready.

And Lilith's answers, more frantically worded every time, were always to the effect that they were not.

At last Mrs. Graham-Shute, telling the lady nearest to her, in the innocence of her heart, that "if they waited about any longer the affair would be completely spoilt," insisted on "making a move" in the direction of the barn. And, it having by this time grown quite dark, while the wind had got up, and sleet begun to fall, the whole party provided themselves with such shelter as was to hand in the shape of waterproofs and umbrellas, and started on their way across the meadow.

When they reached the barn, they found the auditorium dimly lighted with a few lamps and candles, while sounds of hurrying and scuffling behind the curtains gave them a pleasing assurance that they had still some time to wait. It was very cold and very draughty, and the spirits of the miserable audience sank too low for the strains of "*Il Trovatore*," arranged as a pianoforte duet, and very indifferently performed, to revive them.

For it had been discovered that Chris Abercarne was the only person who could be trusted to ring the curtain up and down, and to be scene-shifter, property-master, as well as wardrobe-mistress and dresser. Therefore the local amateur musical talent had been summoned in the shape of a young lady, whose performance was of the slap-dash order, for the treble, and a young gentleman, whose forte lay in a steady thumping power, for the bass. Mrs. Graham-Shute had followed the usual rule in such small musical affairs. When in doubt play pianoforte duets.

The fiction upon which this maxim is founded is probably that two bad performers are equal to one good one. Besides, there is always the chance that when one performer is wrong the other may be right, and that the sounds made by the one who is right may drown those made by the one who is wrong.

"*Il Trovatore*" having come to an end, there was a little faint applause, and then a long interval, filled up chiefly with coughs in front of the curtain, and loud, excited whispers behind it.

At last, when nobody had any hope left but the ever-buoyant Mrs. Graham-Shute, the curtain did at last wobble apart, and disclose a group of male per-

formers, in nondescript attire, belonging to a period so vague that one could only say that it was not the present. They held in their hands sombrero hats, each adorned by a long ostrich feather; but this indication of the Stuart period was contradicted by the table-cloths which they wore round them after the fashion of the Roman toga. On a small table in the centre of the stage was a large open volume, on which the principal performer laid one hand, while he raised the other in the direction of the roof.

In the bewildered audience there was a rustle of programmes, which, written out hastily by Mrs. Graham-Shute while she was "superintending" some other work, were not too legible.

"*"Taking the Bath!"* exclaimed a perplexed old lady plaintively, addressing Mrs. Graham-Shute, who hastened to explain that the *tableau* was meant to illustrate "*Taking the Oath.*"

But the unconscionable old lady was not yet satisfied.

"Oh, yes, of course. Very interesting, and very well done. And—let me see, I'm afraid my history is getting rather rusty," she said, apologetically. "What oath was it?"

"Oh!" answered Mrs. Graham-Shute, with a little impatience in her voice—for really, you know, people might be contented with the pleasure you gave them, and take things for granted a little!—"it was the Covenanters or the Wyckliffites, or some of those people in the Middle Ages. They were always taking the oath for something or other then, you know!"

"Oh, yes, so they were, of course," murmured the

old lady, ashamed at her momentary thirst for exact knowledge.

"It makes an effective picture, you know," said Mrs. Graham-Shute, relenting when she found her questioner so meek. "And we wanted to use the feathers and the hats."

Then the curtains wobbled back again across the picture, and there was a little more applause, and another duet. Then another long interval before the curtains opened upon "The Sleeping Beauty."

As Beauty herself and her Court ladies were all in low-necked light dresses, and as the *tableau* had taken some time to arrange, they shook so much from cold, and looked so blue and pinched, that they set the teeth of the whole audience chattering for sympathy.

The next *tableau*, "Mary Queen of Scots on her way to Execution," was a more ambitious one, the effect being heightened by a recitation from a gentleman with a slight lisp. It would have gone very well but for the fact that something had amused Her Majesty, Liñith, Queen of Scots, who shook with laughter as long as the picture lasted.

Then followed an illustration of Millais's picture "Yes." This was easy, though it was not very like the original; for, as all the male talent among the performers was occupied in making itself up for the next and more ambitious *tableau*, the gentleman who makes the lady say "Yes" had to be impersonated by Miss Browne, in her brother's ulster and a burnt-cork moustache.

Then followed "The Fall of Wolsey." This was a great success, and nobody minded that Wolsey wore a moustache, thickly coated with flour indeed, but

yet perfectly visible to the naked eye. The only *contretemps* was the failure of memory on the part of the reciter, who spoke Wolsey's speech from Henry VIII., got hopelessly "mixed" in the middle of it, and had to be audibly prompted by Cromwell.

The last *tableau* of all was, unhappily, too ambitious. It was an attempt to illustrate Long's "Babylonian Marriage-Market"; but the presence of the realistically blacked Africans unluckily suggested a nigger entertainment on the sands to the unthinking minds among the audience, and, the contagion rapidly spreading, the curtains were hastily drawn amid a chorus of titters impossible to repress.

Then everybody, anxious to get home to eat the dinners which would, undoubtedly, be spoiling, made a rush for Mrs. Graham-Shute, and told her they had enjoyed themselves *so* much, and that the *tableaux* were *beautifully* done, and that she must be quite proud to have such clever daughters, and such a clever son.

And Mrs. Graham-Shute, quite happy, said, in her best Bayswater manner, that she thought they were rather good, "considering they were got up quite in a hurry, you know, and with no help at all." And she kindly added that she was coming to live at Wyngham, and that she would get up "a lot more things" when she had settled down among the delighted inhabitants.

In the meantime, Lilith, who had had an opportunity, while posing as one of the beauties in the marriage-market, to survey the audience as well as the dim lights would allow, was running to Chris in great excitement.

"Do you know who the very handsome man is, sitting near the door?" she asked eagerly.

Chris, who was tired out, and past interest in mundane affairs, answered, wearily, that she did not know anybody, that if there was a handsome man among the audience he didn't belong to Wyngham, where there were only ugly ones. Then Rose, who was present, spoke sedately :

"Oh, you don't know Lilith, Miss Abercarne! She's always in love with somebody or other, and as she's had time to forget the man she was in love with when we left town, she is obliged to fall in love with somebody here to fill up the time."

However, Chris could give no information, and would not interest herself in the matter. Her head ached; she had been too hard at work to spare the time for a proper luncheon, but had had a sandwich brought out to her, which she had scarcely found time to eat. Nobody had thought of bringing her a cup of tea. She had promised her mother, who was in dread lest the barn should be set on fire, as the result of the afternoon's entertainment, not to leave the building until everybody else had gone away, and a servant had been sent to put out the lights.

While the performers were changing their dress, therefore, in the screened-off spaces on either side of the stage, which had been fitted up as dressing-rooms, she occupied herself in putting out such of the foot-lights as had not put themselves out, and in taking down the curtains and folding them up.

By the time this was done, the performers were leaving the building in a body, tired and rather cross, smarting as they were with the sense that the whole thing had been something like a failure, and that

they had not been well treated by somebody. Donald, who had not dared to come near Chris since the severe snub he had received on the previous day, hung about for a brief space in the rear of the rest, talking loudly, though somewhat vaguely, and pushing about the chairs, in the hope of attracting her attention.

But Chris never once looked round; so he presently followed the others, feeling more bitterly than they, that he had been made a fool of, and rendered ridiculous to the eyes of the world.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. RICHARD'S MANIA.

CHRIS was busy with the "properties," which had been collected from different parts of the house, without any formality of asking Mr. Bradfield's permission to use them. Curtains, carpets, valuable Persian rugs, swords, spears, ancient armour (some of it from Birmingham), and "antique" cabinets (chiefly from Germany, by way of Wardour Street).

These had all been treated with scant consideration by the performers, and they now lay scattered about the stage, or were piled in heaps at the back of it, behind the curtains which served as a back-cloth.

Chris knelt down, and began to look over the things, to see what mischief had been done. But she had not been long on her knees when she heard the door of the barn creak, and someone enter softly.

Supposing the intruder to be Donald, she did not look round until he had got upon the stage. When she did glance in his direction, she found that the visitor was not Donald, but Mr. Richard. He wore a caped cloak, and held his hat in his hand; and it suddenly occurred to Chris that he was the handsome stranger who had roused the admiration of Lilith. She rose from her knees, and held out her hand with a smile. Mr. Richard's face became instantly bright with pleasure. But as his smile of greeting died away, a look of anxiety came over his features, which it was easy enough to understand. He was troubled because she looked so tired. It was in answer to his look, for he uttered no word, that she said:

"I am very tired; it has been hard work, I assure you."

For a few moments he held her hand, and looked anxiously into her face. Then a bright thought seemed to strike him, and he led her to one of the chairs which had been piled up at the back, disencumbered it of various "properties" which had been thrown upon it, and drew it forward, inviting her to be seated. But she shook her head.

"I have too much to do," she said.

Again he seemed to understand, for he shook his head, took gently from her hands the curtains she had been folding, and again invited her, this time with a gesture more emphatic than before, to take the chair he had brought. She had lost all fear of him, and without giving him any further answer than a little smile and bend of the head in acquiescence, she sat down with a sigh. It struck her, even at that moment, as being rather curious that she should feel more at her ease, and more in sympathy with this

afflicted recluse even than with her own mother. As this idea flitted through her mind she looked up, and became conscious of a look on Mr. Richard's face which sent a thrill through her, whether of pleasure or pain she scarcely knew. All that she was sure of was that the glimpse that she caught before she cast her eyes hastily down again, was of the handsomest face she had ever seen. No eyes at once so bright and so tender, no mouth so firmly closed, and yet so kindly, no profile so clean cut, had she ever seen before. She had forgotten her work ; she leaned back languidly in the carved chair, resting, and conscious of a sensation, an indescribable sensation of vivid excitement in which there was no fear. As for Mr. Richard, he stood for a few minutes quite still, looking at her. Then she felt his hand upon her arm, and looking up, saw that he was impressing upon her, still by gesture only, that she was to remain where she was, and that he was going away. Then he turned, leaped down from the stage upon the floor of the barn, and made his way rapidly through and over the rows of chairs and benches towards the door.

But Chris had felt so much soothed by his silent sympathy and attentions, that she uttered a little cry, unwilling to let him leave her. She was disappointed to find that he paid no heed, and the tears came to her tired eyes. Tears caused chiefly by physical fatigue they were, although it was this sudden desertion of her strange, silent friend which had set them flowing. Once started, however, they continued to flow for some minutes pretty freely, and she was still drying her eyes disconsolately when Mr. Richard came back again.

And then the reason of his short absence was made plain. He held in his hands a cup of tea.

Before he could reach the stage, Chris, quite as much ashamed as she would have been if a person reputed sane had caught her in her act of childish weakness, sprang up, and pretended to be again very busy. But Mr. Richard's intellect was evidently clear enough as far as she was concerned, and he shook his head and smiled at her as he gently took from her hands for the second time the "properties" she had hastily snatched up.

She yielded even more meekly than before to his mute persuasions, sat down again, and accepted the tea with genuine gratitude.

"How very kind of you! It is just what I have been wanting all the afternoon," she said.

To show that he understood—that he sympathised, he just patted her hand two or three times. This was absolutely the only movement of his which differed in any way from the conventional manners of a well-bred man towards a lady.

When she had finished her tea, he gently took the cup from her, and, commanding her with a gesture of gentle authority to remain where she was, he set about the work on which she had been engaged on his first appearance.

Under her directions he folded up curtains, examined tables, collected weapons and other *bric-à-brac*, until there was nothing left for her to do. From time to time, however, she saw him glance towards the door, evidently watching for someone, and when at last the servant appeared who had been sent to put the lights out, Mr. Richard slid quickly behind the stage out of sight.

Chris was sorry that she had had no opportunity of bidding him good-bye. She knew that he would not dare to come out in the presence of the parlour-maid, and she had no excuse to make to remain behind when the girl had put the lights out. All she could do was to make sure that the barn door was left unlocked when they came out.

On the way across the meadow Chris took care to be left behind, though she thought the girl looked at her curiously. She wanted to see that Mr. Richard got safely out of his hiding-place, although from the intelligence he had shown she had little doubt that he would do so. Just as she was passing the copse of beeches and American oaks which hid the stables from the house, he came up with her. As she turned towards him with a start he held out his hand. As she had placed hers within it, Chris was startled to hear Mr. Bradfield's voice shouting some order to one of the gardeners. He was standing at the bottom of the flight of steps which led up to the house.

At first Mr. Richard did not appear to recognise his voice. But when Chris started, and threw a frightened glance towards the house, he followed the direction of her eyes, and saw as clearly as she did the figure of Mr. Bradfield in the light thrown by the hall lamps through the open door.

In an instant his whole aspect changed. The tender look in his eyes gave place to an expression of the fiercest anger; his face seemed transformed; he snatched his hand from hers, and uttering again the wild sounds which had so much alarmed her on the first occasion of her meeting him, he sprang away from Chris in the direction of the master of Wyngham House.

But, quick as he was, Chris was quicker still. Having long since lost all fear of Mr. Richard, and being anxious only to save him from the pains and penalties he might draw down upon himself if Mr. Bradfield should find out that he was at liberty, she sprang after the unhappy man, and almost threw herself upon him. She was afraid to speak, lest Mr. Bradfield, who had turned sharply at the wild cries uttered by the young man, should recognise her voice and come to meet her. But she pleaded by the touch of her hands, by the expression of her upturned face, which he could see dimly in the darkness.

And she conquered. Under the touch of her hands his own clenched fists fell to his sides, while his eyes regained their tenderness as he looked at her. His feet faltered, and stopped.

Not until then did Chris grow afraid; not until she found that she was resting on the arms of a young and handsome man, whose face was alight with passion indeed, but with passion which was **neither hatred nor fear.**

CHAPTER XVII

A STRANGE MANIA.

CHRIS ABERCARNE had had sweethearts at every period of her young life—little boys of eight and nine had presented her, when she was of a similar age, with bull's-eyes, half-apples, pieces of sealing-wax, and odds and ends of string and slate-pencil ; in fact, with the best and most treasured of their worldly goods. Later than this, boys of a larger growth had written her notes on pink paper, couched in tender terms, and doubtful orthography ; while, later still, offerings of flowers and sweets, of sighs and pretty speeches, had been laid freely at her feet.

While complacently sensible that these contributions were not to be despised, Chris had become so used to tributes of admiration of all sorts as to be hard to impress, and to have earned the reputation of coldness. When, therefore, as she held the arms of Mr. Richard to prevent his making an attack on his guardian, she was conscious of a sensation that was not cold, the experience was so new and strange that it frightened her.

Her success had been immediate and remarkable. He had at once desisted from his intention of making an onslaught upon Mr. Bradfield, and had stood quite still and submissive under the gentle touch of her hands.

Chris glanced up in his face, which was bent

towards hers. She withdrew her eyes at once, glad that it was too dark for him to see the blush which she could feel rising hot in her cheeks ; and as her eyelids fell, after one glance at Mr. Richard's impassioned face, she knew, with a woman's quick, intuitive knowledge which could give no very good reason for itself, that the reputed maniac was sane.

But this thought she found quite as alarming as, and even more exciting than, her previous belief that Mr. Richard was mad. For to struggle with a mad-man is one thing, and to find oneself in the arms of a lover is another ; and this latter was undoubtedly the situation in which her own action had placed her.

Mr. Richard's arms, instead of remaining passive under her touch, had, for a moment, closed round her—only for a moment—then, in response to her look of alarm, to her movement to free herself, he had let her go. But the moment had been long enough for each of the two young people to make a discovery. Mr. Richard had found out that he was possessed by a mad hope : Chris, that he was dominated by a sane one. She drew back from him modestly, and not without a touch of maidenly fear ; but Mr. Richard saw clearly enough that her alarm was neither very deep nor very wounding to his self-esteem. Still, he did not speak, but stood before her with a contrite expression on his face ; and at last when, Mr. Bradfield having disappeared into the house, Chris made a movement in that direction, he felt bold enough to hold out both his hands towards her with a gesture which seemed to entreat forgiveness, if he had offended her.

For answer, Chris, who was getting used to this

courtship without words, put out her hand as she said, "Good-bye."

Mr. Richard took it in his at first with just the measure of sedate courtesy which was conventionally correct; but the moment she tried to withdraw her fingers from his grasp, he seemed to realise suddenly that he was losing her, that the joy he felt in her presence might never be given him again. With rapid and passionate action, his left hand also had closed upon hers; and, before she realised what he was going to do, he had seized both her hands and pressed them to his lips.

Chris, much agitated, snatched away her hands, the more quickly, perhaps, that Stelfox at that moment became visible to her, standing motionless at a little distance, close to the evergreens which bordered the copse. He made a sign to Mr. Richard, who, raising his hat to Chris, followed his custodian in the direction of the house, which they entered by a side door.

Chris went slowly towards the principal entrance. She wanted to speak to Stelfox, and she wanted to avoid Mr. Bradfield, whose head, bending over the desk in his study, she could see *en silhouette* against the lamp-light. The blind had not been drawn down. Just before she reached the steps, Chris saw Mr. Bradfield rise from his chair; and by the time she reached his study door, on her way upstairs, he was standing there waiting for her. He scanned her face narrowly as she came up. Chris, having lost the flush of intense excitement brought into her cheeks by her interview with Mr. Richard, was again looking pale and over-tired.

"They've worked you to death over their tom

foolery at the barn," he exclaimed, angrily, as she came up the stairs. "Why did you have anything to do with it?" Before she could answer he went on, in a more inquisitive tone, "But where have you been? All the others have been back an hour or more. I've been looking out for you."

"I've been at the barn clearing up, putting things straight, and seeing that the lights were put out," answered Chris, looking down rather guiltily.

"Didn't they send someone to help you?" inquired Mr. Bradfield, sharply. "Harriet said she put out the lights."

"So she did."

"But that's a quarter of an hour ago. What have you been doing with yourself since? You have not been staying at the barn in the dark—by *yourself*?"

There flashed quickly through the mind of Chris a kaleidoscopic view of the question whether or not she should tell Mr. Bradfield with whom she had been. In that brief moment of hesitation she saw the matter in all its bearings, and repugnant as the idea of concealment was to her, she decided, for Mr. Richard's sake, not to betray the fact that she had been with him.

She answered, therefore:

"No, I was not alone," and as she said this she unceremoniously ran away up the stairs, with the hurried excuse that she should be late for dinner.

"Are you letting that young fool of a Shute boy worry you to death?" Mr. Bradfield called out after her, in displeased tones.

"Oh, he doesn't worry me," replied Chris, disingenuously as she disappeared into the corridor.

Chris was angry and puzzled with herself. It was quite right and proper that she should feel sorry for Mr. Richard, seeing, as she believed, that he was not being quite fairly treated by his guardian. But why should she feel more than this for him? Why should she, Chris Abercarne, who had been so cold to all men, and so proud of her coldness, feel in this poor fellow an interest more tender than any she had felt before for any man—an interest so strong, that she was ashamed of it, and could not think of it without feeling her cheeks flush, and her heart beat faster?

She hurried to her dressing-room and changed her gown for dinner, delighted to find that her mother had already dressed and gone downstairs. For she wanted to have time to exchange a few words before dinner with Stelfox. This man, she felt sure, knew more about his patient's case than he chose to admit. It was he who had given Mr. Richard his liberty on that day; he whose influence over the young man was strong enough to induce the poor prisoner to return to his prison without a protest.

Chris, who knew that this was about the time when Stelfox would be coming out from the east wing with a tray to fetch Mr. Richard's dinner, waited in one of the alcoves in the long corridor, and at the first sound of the key turning in the lock of the shut-up apartments, she ran to meet him.

But Stelfox, who was always cautious, glanced towards the door of the study, and then at her without a word, but with a gesture of warning to her to hold her peace for a while. Then, while the young lady waited, mute as a mouse, with her eyes fixed on the study door, Stelfox very deliberately locked the door through which he had just come,

and walked towards a small apartment on the right, which contained a telescope and a cupboard full of chemicals, used by Mr. Bradfield when the whim took him, either as an observatory or a laboratory. Chris followed him with noiseless steps. When she had entered the room Stelfox shut the door.

"You wish to speak to me, ma'am?" he asked, looking straight at her, and putting the question with his usual directness of manner.

"Yes," answered Chris, softly; "and I'm quite sure you know what it is about.

"I suppose, ma'am," he answered, without any fencing, "it is about Mr. Richard."

"Yes. You let him come out to-day. Surely you would not let a madman go about by himself, and expect him to come back quietly as Mr. Richard did? It seems to me, Stelfox, that his only mania is a great dislike to Mr. Bradfield."

A little gleam of surprise, or of amusement, Chris hardly knew which, shot out of the man's steady eyes. But the next moment he looked drier, he spoke more cautiously than ever.

"They do take fancies into their heads, ma'am, people that are not quite right do," he answered.

"But *is* he not quite right? Isn't he only pretending? And isn't that why he will not speak?" asked Chris, running the questions one into another in her eagerness. "The more I see of him the more absurd it seems to suppose that he is not in his right senses. Do, Stelfox, tell me all about him, and why he is shut up here."

"I give you my word, ma'am," answered Stelfox at once and straightforwardly, "that I know no more than the dead."

Chris was petrified with astonishment.

"You don't know why he is shut up?" she repeated, slowly.

"No, ma'am. I do know a little more than you do, though I don't want to tell it yet. But why he is shut up here is more than I can tell you."

Chris was utterly bewildered. Before she could recover sufficiently from her astonishment to put another question, Stelfox went on:

"And now, ma'am, I believe you're interested enough in the poor gentleman to do just one thing for him?"

"Yes, oh, yes. What is it?" asked Chris, eagerly. "Is it to speak to Mr. Bradfield? Is it to try to persuade him to let Mr. Richard come out? Is it——"

Stelfox shook his head with a dry smile.

"No, ma'am, it's precisely the opposite of that. What I wish to ask you is not to speak to Mr. Bradfield at all about him, and, above all, not to let him know that you have seen him anywhere but at the windows of the east wing."

Chris was much troubled by this request, and after a few moments spent in thought, she said, earnestly:

"But, Stelfox, I think you are doing Mr. Bradfield a great injustice. He is a very kind-hearted man, and if he were once persuaded that it would do his ward good to come out——"

"He would keep him in all the more securely," said Stelfox, with a dry laugh.

And before Chris could recover from the horror she felt at these words, Stelfox had disappeared from the room in his usual noiseless manner.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BALL.

THE evening of the day following was that of the ball. Chris was in the lowest of low spirits, and would have shut herself up in her room but for Mr. Bradfield, who had insisted on her reserving a square dance for him. The strange communications made by Stelfox, and her own conviction that Mr. Richard was being unfairly treated, made her shy and depressed in the society of the master of the house, whose sharp eyes detected a change in her manner towards him. The girl was troubled also on her mother's account. Mrs. Abercarne had been worried and exasperated, not only by the airs which Mrs. Graham-Shute gave herself, which she could have put up with, but by the orders she gave the servants on matters concerning the ball. Knowing her relationship to their master, and being somewhat impressed also by her pretensions, the servants did not dare to disobey her; so that in the attempt to serve two mistresses they wasted their time and fell to grumbling. A consciousness of the battle between the wills of the two ladies pervaded the entire household by the time the dancing began, and the ball opened in general depression.

"So good of you to give this dance for my girls!" cried Mrs. Graham-Shute's loud voice in Mr. Bradfield's ear, as he stood surveying the dancers, and looking about for Chris. "I've just been telling Mrs.

Ethandene so," she added, glancing at a middle-aged lady by her side, who was one of the great people of the place, and with whom, therefore, Mrs. Graham-Shute thought it advisable to strike up a friendship.

"H'm! Not much in my line—balls!" said Mr. Bradfield, grumpily, as he watched enviously the young fellow who was at that moment leading Chris out for a waltz.

"Who is that very distinguished-looking girl?" asked Mrs. Ethandene, who, having no daughters to marry, could afford a little admiration for those of other women.

"That one in the white nun's veiling, with the marguerites in her bodice?" said Mrs. Graham-Shute, looking in the wrong direction either on purpose or by accident; "that is my daughter Lilith. She is hardly out yet, dear girl; but for my cousin John's ball I *couldn't* refuse her permission, you know."

"No, no! I don't mean her," went on Mrs. Ethandene, a homely person, incapable of taking a hint of any kind. "I mean that tall girl with the good figure—the one in grey silk, with the flat gold necklace?"

"That," answered Mr. Bradfield, in stentorian tones, frowning a little, and stepping forward so that the lady should not misunderstand, "is Miss Christina Abercarne."

Mrs. Graham-Shute, whose face had in a moment become flaccid and expressionless, drew her head well back, and murmured a postscript in Mrs. Ethandene's ear:

"The housekeeper's little girl. I didn't know you meant her. So good of my cousin to let her come, wasn't it?"

Now Mrs. Graham-Shute did not wish her cousin to hear these words ; but being one of those uncomfortable persons who are always more interested in what is not intended for their ears than in what is, he did hear them. And he utterly confounded and exasperated his dear cousin by saying, in the same loud voice as before :

“There wasn’t any goodness about it ; there’s no goodness in being kind to a pretty girl. I gave the ball just because she likes dancing. Nothing else would have induced me to turn my house upside down like this.”

Mrs. Graham-Shute could only affect to laugh at this speech as if it had been some charming pleasantry. But she did it with such an ill grace, being, indeed, extremely mortified, that it was plain she was on the verge of tears.

Meanwhile Chris was not enjoying herself so much as Mr. Bradfield had wished her to do. Her partner was a local production, being, indeed, no other than one of the famous Brownes, without an assortment of whom no Wyngnam gaiety could be considered complete. He was the younger partner in the principal firm of solicitors of the town, and was, as she afterwards learnt, looked upon as “a great catch.” No Wyngnam lady, however, had as yet caught him, and young Mr. Browne, modestly conscious of the interest he excited in the feminine breasts of the neighbourhood, conceived it as more his duty than his pleasure to distribute his attentions as equally as he could among the maidens of the place. In the course of his philanthropic wanderings, therefore, he had fallen temporarily to the lot of Chris, who was, perhaps, not yet sufficiently acclimatised to appreciate the honour as it deserved

For young Mr. Browne's attractions did not include the gift of conversational brilliancy, and Chris found the *tête-à-tête* hard work.

"You go in a great deal for theatricals, don't you?" she said, thinking, from what she had heard, that this was a safe shot.

But he shook his head with a smile, which had in it not more than the minimum of the contempt the average Englishman always shows for any form of recreation in which he is not proficient.

"No, *I* don't, but my brothers and sisters do. Amy, the second one, acts awfully well. They did the *Vicar of Wakefield* last year for the Blind School, and her Olivia was ever so much better than Ellen Terry's. Everybody said so. She'd make her fortune on the stage, that girl would. Of course, my father would never let her go on; but lots of people would say it's a pity."

After this, as his interest in the stage evidently languished, Chris tried Art. Did he sketch? No, young Mr. Browne didn't sketch himself, but his brother Algernon did; awfully well, too, so that everybody said it was simply disgraceful laziness, and nothing else, which kept him from exhibiting at the Academy. And this was the limit of young Mr. Browne's interest in Art.

"No doubt, living down here so close to the sea, you take more interest in yachting and boating than anything else?"

"Well, I can't say I'm much of a sailor myself," answered Mr. Browne, modestly. "But Guy—that's my eldest brother—can sail a yacht better than any of those men who get their living by it. My father keeps a little yacht, and I assure you that when

they're out in dirty weather the captain gives the boat over to Guy."

"Indeed!" said Chris, with as little incredulity as possible. And at last, tired of fishing about in these unpromising waters, she came straight to the point with, "And what is your favourite recreation? Or are you too studious to have one?"

"Oh, no! Walter's the studious one of the family. He'll make a name for himself some day, for he's got the real stuff in him, that chap."

"So that you're the idle one, who looks on and does nothing?"

"I'm afraid I am; but they're all so clever that there's nothing left for me. And I think even they are cut out by my cousins at Colchester. It's an odd thing, but there are three distinct branches of the Browne family, one at Colchester, one here, and one as far north as Caithness, though we haven't the remotest idea how they got up there."

"In the Wars of the Roses, perhaps," suggested Chris, wildly, feeling that she must say something, and that it didn't much matter what it was.

Young Mr. Browne quite caught at the notion.

"Very likely," said he, waking up into vivid interest. "Any national convulsion like that causes the great families to shift from their old places, and distribute themselves over the country. I daresay such disturbances do some hidden good in that way; don't you think so?"

"Oh, no doubt," answered Chris, feebly, wishing that she were on the arm of the brother who could waltz better than anybody else.

The next partner she had was a little man, nearly a head shorter than herself, as dark as young Mr.

Browne was fair. He was of a different type, too—the type that goes up to town now and then, and thinks it the proper thing to speak of the place it lives in as “this hole.” In essentials, however, there was a stronger resemblance between young Mr. Cullingworth’s way of looking at life and young Mr. Browne’s than the former would have been ready to admit.

“Do you like this place?” was his first, almost contemptuous question.

“Yes, I like it better than any place I have ever lived in,” answered Chris, exuberantly. “I don’t seem ever to have known before what fresh air was.”

“Oh, fresh air—yes,” replied young Mr. Cullingworth, his tone betraying several degrees more of disdain than before. “One gets a little too much of that; but of most of the other things which help to make life endurable one gets next to nothing down here. It really is the slowest hole you ever were in, and I shall be obliged to think much worse of you than I should like to do if you don’t heartily wish yourself out of it before very long.”

“I’m horribly afraid I shall have, then, to reconcile myself to that fall in your estimation,” said Chris, smiling. “I like this place much, much better than London. London is only pleasant when you’re rich enough to get out of it whenever you like. Now we were not rich enough—my mother and I—so we were very glad to come down here.”

“Awfully lucky for us down here,” said Mr. Cullingworth, without enthusiasm. For he was not so deeply buried in the provinces as to fall in love with every pretty face he met. “Wonder what on earth made this Bradfield take it into his head to settle down here, don’t you?”

"I suppose he had heard of it as a nice place, and a healthy place," suggested Chris.

"He's been awfully lucky in being taken up by all the best people in the place, hasn't he?"

Now Chris had nothing to say to this, for she thought the "best people" were very lucky in being taken up by Mr. Bradfield. They were mostly poor and proud, which is not a nice combination, and they showed their poverty in their eagerness to avail themselves of Mr. Bradfield's invitations, and their pride in their unanimity in not inviting him back.

Mr. Cullingworth, luckily, did not wait for an answer, but resumed, with admiration:

"Why, there's all the very best society of Wyngham here to-night, there is, indeed. I suppose you know them all, don't you?"

Chris, who thought the assembly decidedly unprepossessing, regretted her ignorance, and said she supposed they would rather look down upon her than seek her society. But Mr. Cullingworth, as representing the "best society" of Wyngham, was magnanimous.

He didn't think there was any feeling of that sort, "'pon his word he didn't." There might have been, of course, if some little bird had not happily whispered about that Mrs. Abercarne was the widow of an officer in the army, and a cousin of Lord Llanfyllin's. As it was, Mr. Cullingworth felt sure that the "best people" were ready to receive her and her mother as equals.

"If you want to know who anybody is, you know, why, I'll tell you," said he, obligingly.

Chris, obliging too, asked the name of a tall, bald-headed man, who, although not particularly interesting

in appearance, looked like a gentleman. Mr Cullingworth's face fell a little, but he answered at once :

"Oh, that Sir George Brandram. Don't know much about him, he's a Wosham man."

His tone was so cold, and his manner intimated such strong disapproval, that Chris did not like to ask more about Sir George, fearing that he might be the hero of some terrible scandal. It was only later that she learnt that the sting of Mr. Cullingworth's account of him lay in the words, "He's a Wosham man." For Wosham, four miles off along the coast, was the deadly rival of Wyngham; and it was a point of honour among their respective inhabitants to acknowledge no good in the dwellers of the rival town.

Meanwhile, the giver of the ball was enjoying himself very little better than the young lady in whose honour it was given. Mr. Bradfield loved to see his house full of guests, having to the full the pleasure of the self-made man in ostentatious hospitality. He took a cynical delight in the knowledge that these people who were civil to him for what he had, and not for what he was, considered themselves his superiors, and would have disdained to shake hands with him while he was still a poor man.

But to-night his enjoyment of his new position was spoilt for him by a chance word, uttered in all good faith by Lilith Shute, who was ashamed of her mother's behaviour towards Chris, with whom she had struck up a friendship, which would have been a warm one if she could have had her will.

Lilith was dancing the Lancers with her host, whose

constant glances in the direction of Chris Abercarne she could not fail to notice.

"How nice she looks to-night," said Lilith, who looked pretty enough herself to afford a word of praise to a rival beauty, and who did not believe in her friend's supposed designs upon the rich cousin's heart.

"She always does look nice," said Mr. Bradfield, gruffly. "And she knows it, too—a little too well, I expect, like all you girls who think yourself beauties."

He was jealous, entirely without reason, of the men younger than himself, with one or other of whom she was dancing or talking whenever he glanced in her direction.

"I don't see how a girl is to help knowing it, when it makes such a difference in the amount of attention she gets," giggled Lilith. "Not," she went on laughingly, "that the attention of anyone here would be likely to turn her head." Then a malicious thought crossed her mind, taking the place of her magnanimity. "Chris Abercarne's thoughts are too much occupied with somebody else for her to derive much entertainment from her partners," she said, demurely.

Mr. Bradfield looked at her scrutinisingly; he dared to hope that Lilith was going to say something encouraging to himself.

"Somebody else?" he asked abruptly. "Who is it?"

Lilith shrugged her shoulders, and laughed mischievously.

"Ah, that's more than I can tell you. All the information I can give you is that he is very, *very*

good-looking, that he met her to-day in the park, and walked a little way with her as she came back from the town, and that she looked very much confused when she met me in the garden, and would have liked, I'm sure, to think I hadn't seen her."

Now there was a little mischief in this speech, for Lilith did not think Chris had behaved quite well in pretending not to know whom she meant when she described the stranger present at the *tableaux*. But, to do her justice, she had not the least intention of rousing the real anger she instantly saw in Mr. Bradfield's face. Not only in his face either, for Lilith felt, when his hand next touched hers in the dance, that he was trembling with rage.

"Oh, ho!" said he, with an exclamation which was meant to sound like a laugh, but which was, in truth, anything but mirthful; so she meets a sweetheart on the quiet, does she?"

Lilith, rather frightened, and seeing that she had made more serious mischief than she had intended hastened to answer:

"Oh, no, no; I didn't mean that. I daresay it was only an accidental meeting. I—I——"

Mr. Bradfield interrupted her sternly.

"Have you ever seen him before, this fellow whom she met?"

"Only once," answered Lilith, quickly.

"Where was that? Was she with him?"

"N—no, she wasn't with him. It was the day of the *tableaux*. He was sitting on one of the back seats, and nobody seemed to know who he was. Not even Chris, for I asked her."

Mr. Bradfield was evidently much puzzled. All the golden youth of Wyngham and the neighbourhood

were dancing in his drawing-rooms that night, and who the fortunate young man could be who was considered good-looking by such a connoisseur as Lilith, and whom Chris condescended to meet on the sly, he had not the remotest notion. Certainly a man's ideas of another man's good looks differed considerably from those of a girl ; but he could not, running over in his mind the eligible young men of the neighbourhood, conceive that any one of them should find favour in the very particular eyes of both the beauties.

With his usual directness, he set about solving the mystery at once. Taking Lilith back to her mother as soon as the dance was over, he went in search of Chris, whom he found sitting in the dining-room, eating an ice, and looking bored by young Cullingworth's conversation.

"Miss Christina, I want to speak to you," said he, shortly.

Chris, upon whom a hazy dread began to fall, as to the subject upon which he wished to interrogate her, followed him with reluctance into the embrasure of the window, which had been kept free from refreshment tables on purpose for *tête-à-têtes* of a more or less interesting sort.

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. BRADFIELD RECEIVES A SHOCK.

MR. BRADFIELD commanded rather than invited Chris to be seated, and planted himself in a rather menacing than lover-like attitude before her. He had just remembered, luckily for him, that he must tone down his martinet-like manner, as he had no claim whatever on the girl to give him a right to be offended.

"So you've found a sweetheart?" he began, in a voice which he had subdued to the pitch of a confidential *tête-à-tête*, but which betrayed his feelings more clearly than he had intended.

A bright pink blush rose in the pale face of Chris to the very roots of her hair. She hesitated a moment before replying, but her hesitation was not of a kind to inspire her interlocutor with hopeful feelings. She looked frightened, but she looked also as if she did not mean to be bullied. He did not wait for her to reply before he said :

"Did you tell your mother what I said to you the other day?"

Chris just glanced up into his face, and resolved not to pretend to misunderstand.

"No, Mr. Bradfield."

"Why not?"

"It would make no difference."

"You've found someone else you like better?"

Again Chris hesitated. She had grown very white,

and was chilled by a fear of this man. There was something hard, something cruel in his manner, which let her, for the first time, into the secret of those qualities of doggedness and remorselessness in his nature, which had helped him to get on in the world. She rose quickly, with the feeling that she could hold her own better at her full height, than when she was under the direct fire of those strange eyes. She was in terror lest he should find out who her companion had been on her walk through the park that afternoon. The truth was that it had been Mr. Richard, who, after evidently lying in wait for her among the trees, had accompanied her a little way, as usual in silence, but with a manner in which there was no longer any attempt at concealment of the fact that he loved her. But this was the one fact beyond all others which Chris was anxious to hide from Mr. Bradfield. For the unhappy Mr. Richard would certainly be made to suffer for it, if his guardian had any suspicion that he was his rival.

Mr. Bradfield, impatient at her silence, spoke again :

"I suppose you will think I have no right to ask you such questions; but you are under my roof. If I cannot be your accepted husband, I am, at any rate for the time, your guardian, and I hear that you meet someone else," added he, his tone betraying the jealous anger that he felt.

Now Chris knew what his information was, and who his informant had been. She turned to him quickly, and laughed uneasily.

"Lilith told you; she saw me in the park." Then, with a fast beating heart, dreading the answer, she asked, "Didn't she say who it was?"

"She said she didn't know. But perhaps it's some plot between you girls, and she knows his name as well as you do."

"There is no plot between us, and I never said anything to her about him," said Chris, quickly. "But I don't deny that I have met a gentleman belonging to the place once or twice by accident, by accident entirely; and as you take it so seriously, I shall certainly take great care not to tell you his name."

Mr. Bradfield was evidently furious; but he only said, drily:

"Does your mother know of it?"

"No. But," added Chris, defiantly, "you can tell her if you like."

Her spirits had risen, for during the last few moments she had felt pretty sure that either her words or her manner, or both, had diverted his suspicions, if he had had any, from the right quarter.

And all that poor Mr. Bradfield got by his talk with her was the loss of his dance; for Chris went away and hid herself, rather than walk through the quadrille with him.

The next day was the faded, uncomfortable, heavy-eyed day which usually succeeds to a night of unusual dissipation. Mrs. Graham-Shute put the climax to the general discomfort by insisting that they should all, directly luncheon was over, drive some miles in the cold to inspect ruins.

"But why in the world to-day?" as Lilith grumbled aloud. "As they've stood there since A.D. 250, mightn't they manage to stand there a few days longer?"

But Mrs. Graham-Shute saw no reason in an

point of view but her own. They had an afternoon to spare ; there were ruins to be seen ; therefore ruins must be seen on that spare afternoon. So they all drove off in the cold, looking very blue about the nose, and feeling too cold to go to sleep, even under a mountain of rugs and furs, and nobody at all got any pleasure out of the expedition except John Bradfield, who drove Lilith over in his dog-cart, and managed, by steady persistence, to get Chris to consent to drive back with him. He was so gentle, so humble, touched just the right chords of gratitude in her so deftly, under his seeming clumsiness, that the girl could not hold out against him. However, she made her own conditions.

"Mind," she said, holding up a warning forefinger in its pretty glove, as he made a collection of rugs for her comfort, and held out his hand to help her to mount, radiant with his victory, "you are not to try to converse with me except upon the subjects I specially choose, for I'm too cold to be civil, unless I have everything my own way."

Mr. Bradfield, glad to get her upon any terms, consented with a roar of laughter. But Mrs. Graham-Shute, who overheard this speech from Chris, was overwhelmed by the girl's audacity.

"I wonder how my cousin puts up with such impudence," she said, in a tone of exasperation, as she floundered, panting, through the mud which, at this season, was an indispensable adjunct to the ruins. "She puts on all the airs of a person of consequence, like her horrible old mother. Thank goodness, I've escaped an afternoon with *her*, at any rate."

"That's just what she said of you when she refused

to go, my dear," said her husband, gently, in her ear, as, tottering under her weight, he helped her into the landau.

Chris need not have felt apprehensive. Mr. Bradfield had thought matters over, and decided that the fortress was not to be stormed, that his best plan lay in starving out the garrison by a long and careful siege. Besides, it was too cold for ardent love-making; their jaws were stiff as they drove in the face of the winter wind. So that Chris was pleased to find that her drive back with Mr. Bradfield was a good deal pleasanter than her drive out had been in the company of Mrs. Graham-Shute.

It was Mr. Bradfield who chose the topics of conversation after all. For he was so anxious to prove his good faith that he gave her no opportunity of starting any subject of her own, but beguiled the way by stories of his life on Australian sheep farms. His experience had been hard, and some of his tales of hardship and privation, while they had the desired effect of securing the young girl's sympathy, made her shudder.

"Why, I would rather have remained as poor as you say you were all my life than have made a large fortune in such hard ways as those!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Bradfield's face clouded suddenly at her words, so that Chris began to wonder what there was in her speech to offend him.

To break the silence which followed, she said:

"You must be very glad those hard times are over?"

As he answered, one of the hard looks his face could assume at times made his features look repulsive in their rugged harshness.

"Glad!" he exclaimed. "There isn't a crime I wouldn't commit sooner than go through them again."

Chris glanced at his face, and a sudden remembrance of Mr. Bradfield's unfortunate ward flashed into her mind. Without reason, by a woman's sensitive instinct, she connected the words he had just uttered, the hard, harsh spirit which they betrayed, with the treatment of the man whom he kept shut up in such a mysterious manner in the east wing.

By this time they were passing Wyngnam Station. A few passengers were coming out in a straggling thread, for the London train had just come in. Although the afternoon was light for the time of year, it was too dark to distinguish clearly the faces of these people, although something of their figures was discernible. Mr. Bradfield's gaze was suddenly attracted by the appearance of a man who was walking in the road a little in front of the dog-cart. As soon as he caught sight of him, he stopped abruptly in the middle of a remark he was making to Chris. As his voice, besides being very gruff, was very loud, Chris saw nothing remarkable in the fact that as he stopped speaking, the man in the road turned quickly round.

"John Bradfield!" he cried, stepping back to the roadside. He had not spoken loudly, so there was nothing surprising in the fact that Mr. Bradfield drove on, apparently without hearing the stranger's voice.

But glancing at him as they drove on, Chris was able to see, even in the twilight which was fast closing in, that his face was distorted and drawn with a strong emotion.

And the emotion was fear.

CHAPTER XX

MR. BRADFIELD WELCOMES AN OLD FRIEND.

IT was impossible for Chris not to be struck by the change in Mr. Bradfield's face, impossible for her to avoid the supposition that this change was caused by the sight of the shabby man who stood on one side as the dog-cart went by, and called to "John Bradfield" by name.

Her companion was too shrewd not to know this. He turned to her, therefore, and said :

"That was a narrow squeak. Never had such a fright in my life as that fellow gave me ; I thought I'd run over him."

Chris was deceived by this speech, and she said, innocently :

"He knew you, Mr. Bradfield. He called to you by name !"

Mr. Bradfield turned in his seat, as if to have another look at the man ; but they had turned a corner, and he was out of sight.

"Did he, though ?" said he, as if in surprise. "Well, I daresay he'll find me out, if he wants anything of me. People have a trick of doing that." Then, as if dismissing the subject from his thoughts, he said, "Well, haven't I been 'good ?' Will you come out with me again ?"

Chris laughed with some constraint. Mr. Bradfield certainly had behaved well, but she did not want to put his good behaviour to any further tests. There

was about him all the time a certain air of an angler playing his fish, which made her ask herself whether she were not in truth compromising herself by receiving from him even those attentions, slight as they were, which she could not avoid.

They reached home before the rest of the party, and Chris ran upstairs to her mother, while Mr. Bradfield went to his study. Stelfox, who made himself useful about the house when he was not in attendance upon Mr. Richard, was just placing upon the table a great pile of letters. This being Christmas eve, the mid-day post had been some hours late.

Mr. Bradfield glanced searchingly at Stelfox. He was rather afraid of that faithful servitor, who was too useful a person, and perhaps too shrewd a one, to be dismissed. Manners, the weak-eyed secretary, was away for his holiday, so that master and man were alone. After a few moments' rapid debate with himself, Mr. Bradfield asked a question which had been very near his lips since the night before, when Lilith's communication had made him uneasy.

"How is your patient to-day, Stelfox?" he asked, as an opening.

"About the same as usual, sir."

"Been giving you much trouble lately?"

"Not more than usual, sir."

"And that's not much, eh?"

"No, sir, that's not much."

"Do you think he gets any more rational as time goes on? Any more fit to be about?"

Mr. Bradfield put this question in the same tone as the rest, but the look with which he accompanied the words was more penetrating, more curious than before.

He wanted Stelfox to look up, but the man persisted in looking down.

"He's about the same, sir, as he's been ever since I've known him."

"Just as mad? Just as unfit to go about uncontrolled?"

"Exactly the same, sir."

Now Mr. Bradfield was not satisfied with this answer. He looked angrily at all that he could see of Stelfox's stolid face, and then said, shortly:

"I haven't seen you to speak to about that affair of Wednesday last — you know — when he got away."

Stelfox raised his eyes for a moment, as respectfully as ever.

"No, sir, you haven't."

"Did you have any difficulty with him, in getting him to come back? It was in the barn you found him, wasn't it—where I told you he was?"

"Yes, sir, it was in the barn. I had no difficulty with him."

"And, of course, you have taken good care that he shouldn't get out again?"

Now this was a question, undoubtedly, although he hardly meant it to be taken as one. It was supposed to be a matter-of-course remark, that hardly needed an answer. Stelfox's answer was, perhaps, just the least bit aggressive in tone.

"I have taken the same care of him as usual, sir; I can't do no more."

John Bradfield, as he glanced again at the man's face, looked doubtful still; but he saw that he had gone as far as he dared.

"I am quite satisfied with your care of him, Stel-

fox, quite satisfied. Of course, I'm always anxious, always nervous. I shouldn't like him to get out again, and frighten the ladies."

"There's no fear of that, sir," said Stelfox, as stolidly as ever.

"It's a very awkward and responsible position that I have taken upon myself, in undertaking to keep an insane person under my own roof," pursued John Bradfield. "The expense is nothing to me, and, of course, I don't mind the danger to myself. His father was a very valued servant of mine, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for his son. I could never have borne to see the boy taken away to a pauper lunatic asylum."

He paused, and seemed to expect some comment. So Stelfox said :

"I understand, sir ; I quite understand."

But he looked as if he did not.

"And the hard part of it is," went on Mr. Bradfield, in a loud, aggrieved tone of voice, "that if some friend, say, of his father's, were to turn up now, and want to see him, ten to one he'd think I ought to have treated the lad differently, put him into an asylum, or done something or other that I haven't done."

Again he paused. Stelfox, still stolid, still apparently without vivid interest, said :

"No doubt, sir."

Mr. Bradfield would have given anything to know exactly what was passing in the man's mind. Stelfox would have given anything to know what was passing in his master's.

Mr. Bradfield, impatient, turned on his heel, and began rummaging among the letters the post had

brought, tossing on to his secretary's already well-covered table all those directed in handwritings he did not know, and opening the rest, only to throw them for the most part, half-read, into the waste-paper basket.

"However," he went on, still reading, "I have the satisfaction of knowing I have done my best for the lad. And so have you, Stelfox. And I may as well take this opportunity of telling you that you will start the New Year with new wages. No objection to another ten pounds a year, I suppose?"

"Not the least, sir, and thank you," replied Stelfox, moving aside from the door as somebody knocked at it from the outside.

Then Mr. Graham-Shute put his head in.

"Any admission?" said he, and he brought the rest of himself inside without waiting for an answer. "It's d—d cold in these parts, Bradfield, and you keep your horses too fat. We've been a week on the road back from those d—d ruins. I'm frozen to death. There was only one comfort, and that was that my little Maudie's jaw got too stiff to move. So we had a heavenly spell of silence on the way back."

He walked to the fire, and began slowly taking off his silk muffler, his gloves, and his overcoat in the cheery warmth.

Stelfox had quietly withdrawn.

"By-the-bye, Bradfield," went on Mr. Graham-Shute, agitating his jaw violently, as if under the impression that in the Arctic atmosphere outside something had gone wrong with it, "you'll never guess who we met down in the town just now, looking about for you."

John Bradfield's back was turned to his cousin, who might otherwise have seen that the approaching communication was no surprise to him. He was expected to show curiosity, however, so he asked :

"Well, who was it?"

"Why, your old pal, Alfred Marrable, who went out to Australia with you over thirty years ago. He doesn't seem to have done as well out there as you did, by the looks of him. I knew him in a moment, dark as it was, by that odd limp in his walk. So I stopped the carriage and spoke to him. It appears he has come down here on purpose to see you. So I put him on the road. We were full, or I would have given him a lift."

"Much obliged to you, I am sure," said John Bradfield, rather more drily than he meant to do.

Mr. Graham-Shute, who took an intelligent interest in his cousin's affairs, stared at him in astonishment.

"What, don't you want to see him?" he asked. "I thought I was bringing you the best piece of news you'd had for a long day. For you've generally such a good memory for your old friends, and I know that you and Marrable were always great chums. Did you fall out, or what?"

"No," said John Bradfield, recovering himself. "But the longest memory is not eternal, and it's seventeen years since I saw him last. I'll do all I can for him, certainly, for the sake of auld lang syne."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a footman knocked at the door, and informed his master that a person wished to see him, a person who gave the name of Marrable.

"Oh, yes, I'll go and see him myself," said John Bradfield, who hoped that his cousin would, in the meantime, take himself off, and allow him to welcome his old friend Marrable *en tête-à-tête*.

"I daresay he'll be too shy, after all these years, to come in at all," said he, as he went out. But what he thought was, "I'll do my best to get rid of him."

Graham-Shute's voice, however, rang out cheerily after him :

"You have forgotten Marrable, if that's what you think of him."

John Bradfield went slowly down the few stairs which led into the inner hall. By the time he reached the bend which would bring him in sight of the new-comer, he had made up his mind.

"I must take the bull by the horns," said he to himself. "After all, the man's a fool, and will be easy to manage, even if he does know or guess a little too much."

With all his knowledge of the world, John Bradfield was capable of making the mistake of thinking a fool can be easy to manage.

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. MARRABLE'S MERRY CHRISTMAS.

SURELY no human creature ever trod this earth, who, by his appearance, seemed less likely to inspire fear than Mr. Marrable.

A fair, colourless, middle-aged man, under the middle height, and inclined to be stout, he was the most inoffensive-looking person in the world, and, to judge by his demeanour as he stood in the hall, holding his shabby tall hat in his hand, and looking about him with an air of awe-struck astonishment, the humblest and the meekest.

As John Bradfield approached him, with outstretched hand, and a rather forced smile of welcome on his face, Mr. Marrable withdrew his gaze from the objects around him, and fixed it nervously upon his old friend.

"Well, Alf," began John Bradfield, as he came up to his abashed old friend, "this is a strange meeting after all these years, isn't it?"

The other man, after hesitating a moment, thrust his hand with great delight into that of his old friend, and instantly became as talkative and lively as a moment before he had been taciturn and depressed.

"Why, John, so it is," he exclaimed, with a smile broadening on his plump and placid face, turning his head a little towards his companion, after the manner of those who are slightly deaf. "And glad am I to see you again, old chap, and looking so well too, and—"

and so prosperous," and he gave a shy glance round him. "Do you know," he went on, growing buoyantly confidential under the influence of his friend's hearty grip of the hand, "that I thought you wanted to cut me? That you had grown too grand for your old friends."

"No. When was that?" asked John Bradfield, shortly.

He was not a good actor, and Marrable looked at him doubtfully, as he answered:

"Why, out in the street just now, outside the station. I knew you in a moment, wrapt up as you were, and cutting such a dash, too. But then you were always a dashing fellow, even in the old days, John," maundered on the unprosperous one, admiringly. "I called out to you, but you took no notice. And I said to myself, 'Ah, he's like all the rest of 'em; he knows his friends by their coats. He——'"

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself," returned John Bradfield's loud voice. "I never turned my back on an old friend yet, and I'm not going to begin now. Did you come down here to see me?"

"Yes," answered the other, meekly. "Well, at least, the fact is I heard of you quite by chance, and of how you'd got on, and as I'm down in the world, and I remembered your good heart in the old days, John, I thought I'd just run down and have a peep at you, and then, if I wasn't wanted, I could come away."

Mr. Bradfield felt a sensation of relief; these words seemed to show him a way out of his difficulty. But the next moment he was undeceived.

"If you don't want me here, John, I'll just spend a few days in the town here; I daresay I can find lodgings good enough for me easily enough, and all I'll trouble you for will be my fare back to town, which you'll not begrudge me, for old acquaintance sake."

Mr. Bradfield inwardly called down upon his old friend's head something which was not a blessing. He was not going back to town then, but proposed to potter about the place, chattering of course to everyone he met about his old friendship with the rich Mr. Bradfield, and either letting fall or picking up some scrap of information which it would be prejudicial to the rich Mr. Bradfield's interests to be known.

The first suggestion which came into John Bradfield's mind was bribery, but the next moment's reflection told him that this was always a dangerous method, for if he were to make Marrable a handsome money present with the condition that he must take himself back to town immediately, that gentleman, little gifted as he was with intellectual brilliancy, could hardly fail to see that his old friend must have some strong motive for wishing to get rid of him. His curiosity once roused, he could hardly fail to find out something which would serve as an excuse for blackmailing in the time to come. The only alternative to this course was, John Bradfield felt, to keep his old chum under his own eye while he remained at Wyngham, so he said:

"Come, come; that's not the way I treat my old friends. Stay and spend Christmas with me, Alf, and when it's over, and you back to town, where I suppose your heart lies—for you're a thoroughbred

cockney, I know—I'll see what I can do to set you on your legs, and give you a fresh start in life."

Although Marrable was pleased, he was not overwhelmed with joy and gratitude as John Bradfield had expected. In truth Alfred, on learning by chance of the change in his old friend's circumstances, had taken it for granted that he would be allowed, nay, invited to share in John Bradfield's luck, as, in the old days of struggling and hardship, he, then the more prosperous one of the two, had shared what he had with John. An invitation to spend Christmas, even with the promise of help afterwards, was only a small measure of the hospitality he had expected; his answer betrayed his feelings.

"Thank you, thank you, John. I thought you couldn't have forgotten old times altogether. I thought you had more heart than that. As for London, I seem to have lost my old fondness for it somehow. The old folk are dead; my poor mother died there as soon as we got back. I seem to have got disgusted with the bricks and mortar somehow. There's nothing I should like better than to settle down for the rest of my days in a nice country place, as you have done."

John Bradfield did not take this hint, as his friend had hoped. But he invited Marrable to come upstairs, and said he would see what he could do for him in the way of evening dress.

Unfortunately this was not much. John Bradfield was slim, Alfred Marrable was stout. The struggle of the latter to get into the clothes of the former left him, therefore, both uncomfortable and apoplectic. No persuasions, however, would induce him to go down to dinner in his own shabby morning clothes, for

Marrable flattered himself that he was a lady's man, and that he looked his best—which he did not—in evening dress.

John Bradfield, who had been turning over the situation in his mind, gave his old friend a hint as they went downstairs.

"I say, old chap," said he, in a confidential tone, "there's one thing I want you to do to oblige me."

"Anything, old man, anything."

"You see, I'm a great man here, not the poor starveling I was when you and I went out in the steerage to Melbourne thirty years ago. I don't think I've grown much of a snob, but still one doesn't care, when one's got on, to have all the servants talking about their master having been glad enough to do things for himself once. Do you see?"

"Oh, yes, yes; of course, of course. I understand perfectly. You may rely upon me, old chap. I flatter myself I'm not wanting in tact, whatever my faults may be."

John Bradfield, although he feared that Alfred was giving himself too high a character, went on:

"So no talk about old times and hard times, or"—his voice trembled a little here, for this was in truth a point on which he was most anxious—"or old acquaintances. Let the dead past bury its dead, as the poet says," he continued, jocularly, "and we'll have a merry Christmas over its grave."

"That's it, that's it; so we will," agreed Marrable, heartily, as they reached the drawing-room door.

In all good faith Alfred Marrable had given his promise to be discreet, and in all good faith John Bradfield had told him that he should have a merry Christmas. But unluckily the powers of darkness

in the shape of Mrs. Graham-Shute, were against him. Indeed, John Bradfield had had his doubts about her, and as he entered the drawing-room with his *protégé* in his ill-fitting clothes, he whispered to the latter :

“Never mind the Queen of Snobs,” with a glance in the portly lady’s direction.

Mrs. Graham-Shute was already looking at them with an unpromising stare. She had a hatred of shabbily-dressed people, the keener that it was only by a great effort that she herself escaped that category. She had been indignant when her husband stopped the landau to speak to this “person,” and now to have the “person” obtruded upon her notice, in clothes which did not belong to him, was an outrage to her dignity, which at once dispelled the good humour which is traditionally supposed to belong to fat people. If people must invite their humble friends, they should not ask them to meet guests of greater consideration. It was extremely awkward and unpleasant, as one didn’t know where to draw the line between too much civility, which made the humble friend “presume,” and too little, which might offend one’s host.

In the case of Alfred Marrable, Mrs. Graham-Shute certainly did not err in the former manner. Her disdain of the poor man, who was just the sort of weak-minded person to be impressed by her foolish arrogance, had a crushing effect upon him ; so, far from becoming loquacious on the subject of old times, the poor man could scarcely be prevailed upon to open his lips at all. The glare of the cold, fish-like eyes, turned full upon him at dinner—for she sat opposite to him—even took away the poor man’s

appetite; and John Bradfield was able to congratulate himself that night that the evening had passed off (according to his views) so well.

The next day was Christmas day, and Alfred Marrable, always under the watchful eyes of his careful old friend, began it beautifully. He went to church, was almost pathetically civil and attentive to the ladies, delighted to carry their prayer-books, and to render them such small services of a like kind as he could. At luncheon, by which time Mrs. Graham-Shute had grown sufficiently used to him to ignore him altogether, he thawed a little, and needed the warning eye of his host to restrain him from making appropriate Christmas allusions to old times over his glass of port.

But it was at the Christmas dinner that evening that his discretion melted away like wax before the fire, and he made up for lost time and past reticence with a loquacity even more dangerous than John Bradfield had feared.

He alluded to change of fortune, some for the better, some for the worse, when they had got as far as the turkey. When they reached the plum-pudding, he got so far as to remember old friends by the initials of their names; and he broke down altogether into amiable chatter about thirty years ago, at the cheese.

John Bradfield frowned, but by this time frowns were thrown away upon Alfred. Nothing short of taking him by the shoulders and turning him out of the room would have checked the flow of his half-cheerful, half-sorrowful, wholly sentimental reminiscences.

Mr. Graham-Shute, observing John Bradfield's dis-

approval in his face, and being, moreover, really interested in the past life of the extraordinarily successful man, mischievously encouraged Marrable by his sympathetic questions; while his wife, who considered these allusions to a ragged past indecent and revolting, tried in vain to talk more loudly than ever to drown the remarks both of Alfred Marrable and her liege lord.

"Dear me, that's very interesting! And so you walked six hundred miles up the country with only one shirt apiece, and your feet for the most part tied up in straw for the want of boots!" said Mr. Graham-Shute, with deliberate distinctness, thus cleverly epitomising for the benefit of the entire company a rambling story which Alfred had been pouring into his ear.

"I'm sure we shall have skating to-morrow, at least almost sure, though of course one never knows, and the frost may break any minute, and then there would be an end of everything, just when the ice in the parks will be getting into nice condition, and when there are sure to be some ponds and things down here that will bear, though I think myself that skating in the country is always more risky than in town, because there are not so many appliances and things, in case you are drowned," babbled out Mrs. Graham-Shute, with one nervous eye on dear cousin John, and the other on that wretched William, who was by this time cracking nuts while he listened to Alfred, and who took care, as his wife raised her voice, to raise his also.

The unhappy Marrable went on:

"Yes, indeed! Times are changed, and no mistake, since then. Fancy that fellow there," and

he gently indicated, by a wave of his bunch of grapes, his unhappy host, "fancy him coming to me, with a coat on his back that he bought for eighteenpence from the ship's steward, and saying to me: 'Alf, my boy! it's all up with me! I'm stone-broke; and I believe I've got a touch of the fever upon me, and I know I can never stand the hard life out there in the bush. I shall just go and throw myself into the dock basin before another night has passed over my head.' Fancy that, now, for a man that must have thousands and thousands a year, to judge by the style he lives in, and the goodness of the wines he gives us."

And Mr. Marrable ended with an expressive smack of the lips. Mr. Graham-Shute nodded appreciatively.

"Was that when you first went out?" he asked with interest.

"Oh, no. We'd been knocking about out there for some time, and not doing much good, either of us. That was the odd part of it, that Bradfield, who's got on so well since, didn't seem to do any better than I."

Being unable to silence her husband, Mrs. Graham-Shute had now turned her attention to occupying "dear cousin John" with conversation, so that William's delinquencies should escape his notice. Otherwise, it is possible that John Bradfield might have been exasperated into some heroic measure to stop his old friend's tongue. As it was, Mr. Graham-Shute's kindly "Dear me, yes, that was curious!" encouraged Marrable to go on:

"Let me see, where had I got to? Oh, yes, I remember, Bradfield had told me he meant to do

away with himself ; he was so down on his luck, poor chap ! I didn't know what to say to him ; the little capital I had gone out with was all gone ; when who should we come across but the old chum we had gone out with, the only one of the three who had done any good—Gilbert Wryde ! ”

At the mention of this name, Mr. Graham-Shute suddenly put down his nut-crackers, and leaned back in his chair.

“ Ah ! ” cried he, “ that's the name I've been trying to remember ; I knew there were three of you who went out to Australia together, and I couldn't remember the name of the third. I never saw him, but I've read some of his letters to John when they were little more than lads ; and they were full of most uncommon sense for such a young chap. I thought to myself then that he ought to get on. So he did, did he ? Gilbert Wryde ! ”

As he repeated the name deliberately and slowly, to impress it upon his memory, both John Bradfield and Chris looked up, rather startled. Chris was the more impressed of the two, for she had not been expecting to hear the name, while John Bradfield had.

Quite innocent of the effect his information was producing, Marrable resumed his story.

“ Get on ! I believe you, as well as our friend John here himself, and in half the time. He was the right sort, too, old Gilbert, and he took us by the hand, and set us on our legs again, and there was no more talk of suicide after that. He set me up in business in Melbourne, and he took John away with him up country, where he'd made his own fortune at sheep-farming, and where he evidently put him

in the way of making his. Poor Wryde! He did not live long to enjoy his fortune. I never saw him again."

John Bradfield had been listening to this speech with only the smallest pretence of attending to what his cousin Maude was saying. Marrable, catching his eye, and being in too jovial a mood to understand the menace in his host's expression, turned to him with the direct question :

"Ah, John, you wouldn't be in the position you are to-day if it hadn't been for Gilbert Wryde, would you?"

John Bradfield's face was as white as his friend's was rosy. He answered at once, in a hard, metallic tone :

"We did each other mutual good service, Wryde and I. I'm not likely to forget him, certainly."

"Ah!" pursued Marrable, "if he'd only been alive and here to-day, it would have been a merry meeting indeed, eh, John?"

CHAPTER XXII.

LEFT OUT IN THE COLD.

EVEN Mrs. Abercarne, at the other end of the table, could see that something had gone wrong: Mr. Bradfield's voice as he loudly assented, had not the right ring: Mr. Graham-Shute looked mischievous, his wife looked anxious, while Chris looked as if she had been frightened. The housekeeper gave the signal hastily to Mrs. Graham-Shute, even in the midst of the laughter and cracker-pulling which was going on among the young people. Lilith and Rose were surprised, but both Mrs. Graham-Shute and Chris jumped up in a hurry, quite eager to leave the scene of what looked like the beginning of a serious quarrel. For, although no angry words had passed between the gentlemen, Marrable's effusive geniality in face of his host's ever-increasing abruptness, looked ominous to those who knew the temper of the latter.

When the ladies were assembled in the drawing-room, and Chris had sat down to the piano to play some carols, Mrs. Graham-Shute, for want of a better, was forced to make a confidante of the obnoxious lady-housekeeper.

"Exceedingly unpleasant, was it not, to have to endure the presence of that extraordinary individual at dinner," she said to Mrs. Abercarne in a confidential tone. "Of course, it is very good of my cousin to remember his old friends, but it's a pity he cannot

find some who would make themselves more agreeable to the rest of us. Such a pleasant party we should have been, too, if it hadn't been for that !”

Now Mrs. Abercarne had been smarting for the past week under the snubs and slights which Mrs. Graham-Shute had administered to her daughter and herself, and she was by no means mollified by the Bayswater lady's momentary condescension. She pricked up her ears, figuratively speaking, rejoicing in her opportunity.

“Yes,” she answered, frigidly, drawing herself up and surveying Mrs. Graham-Shute in a manner full of stately vindictiveness. “I quite agree with you. Mr. Bradfield is a great deal too good to his old friends ; and they do make themselves excessively disagreeable ; and the party would be much pleasanter without them.”

And poor Mrs. Graham-Shute, try as she would, could not look as if she did not perceive that this speech was a barbed one. She turned away abruptly, and, taking the place at the piano which Chris had just vacated, began hurriedly and very badly, and with vicious thumps upon the keys, a hymn about “peace on earth and goodwill towards men.”

Chris had stolen into the recess formed by the great bay window on the western side of the room. She heard a sound like the breaking of glass outside, and had left her place at the piano to look out. Raising the heavy curtain, and pulling back the blind, she saw dimly through the moisture on the window-pane, the forms of two men, one of whom was so close that he seemed to have been trying to look through the window. She could just see enough of them to know that the figures were those of Mr.

Richard and his keeper Stelfox, and her heart leapt up, and her brain seemed suddenly to be on fire, as there rang in her ears the words used by Mr. Marrable about Gilbert Wryde.

Gilbert Wryde! Gilbert Wryde—Mr. Bradfield's benefactor! She remembered the portrait bearing that name, and she remembered Mr. Bradfield's change of expression at the sight of it. That expression, which she had taken for annoyance, must then have been caused by some more tender emotion, to which also the subsequent disappearance of the miniature must be traced. And then the likeness between the portrait of Gilbert Wryde and the solitary occupant of the east wing? Chris felt sick with excitement, bewilderment and fear. She would have given the world to be able to forget the problem which was beginning to trouble her peace of mind, to shut her mind to the questions she could not help asking.

In the meantime, a great impulse of pity for Mr. Richard, spending his Christmas alone except for his attendant, and peeping in through the windows at the warmth and light inside the room he was not allowed to enter, seized her, and caused her to find an opportunity of leaving the room unobserved. Putting on a hooded cloak, and wrapping it tightly round her, she went out into the garden.

Chris, who had run down the steps, paused at the bottom. The impulse upon which she had acted in coming out into the night was the kindly one of exchanging a Christmas greeting with the outcast from the east wing. But to this impulse had succeeded a fit of maidenly shyness. Twice since their last meeting in the barn, she had encountered Mr. Richard

in the park in a manner which could scarcely have been the result of chance, and on each of these occasions the silent happiness he had shown in her society had touched her deeply ; so deeply, indeed, that she could not help feeling a little self-consciousness about this meeting which she herself was bringing about. Whether she would have turned back, following the dictates of her impulse of shyness and maidenly modesty, it is impossible to say. For at that moment she heard a footstep on the path, and a great thrill of a feeling she did not understand passed through her as a voice she had never heard before said low in her ear :

“ I wish you a merry Christmas.”

With a start she turned, and put her hand into that of Mr. Richard, who kissed it with the fervour of a lover.

“ I am afraid your Christmas is not a very merry one,” she said gently.

They were standing in the full moonlight, and Mr. Richard was gazing with his usual melancholy into her face.

“ No, it has not been happy,” he answered very slowly, and with an apparent effort, “ until now.”

Then he stood for a short time in silence, and Chris, utterly thrown off her balance by new and strange feelings, did not notice, or did not mind, that he held her hand in his own with a warm pressure which said more than his words had done.

Chris roused herself by an effort from the trance of pleasant feeling into which the first words she had ever heard him utter had thrown her.

“ You are here by yourself !” she exclaimed. “ I thought Stelfox was with you !”

Mr. Richard seemed to find it even more painful than she had done to break by speech the spell which the happiness of the meeting had cast upon him. His first answer was a heavy sigh. Then he said, gently, with the same strange appearance of speaking with difficulty, as if the exercise of speech were an unaccustomed thing which made him shy and nervous :

“He is not far off. He did not want me to come out here to-night. But I begged that the day might not pass for me without one sight of you.”

He uttered these words in such a low voice, and so indistinctly, that Chris had some difficulty in understanding him. Perceiving this he became so painfully nervous, that in repeating the words he was more indistinct than ever. He had scarcely finished saying them for the second time when Stelfox came with his usual noiseless footsteps round the angle of the house.

He started on seeing the young lady, and, without uttering a word, made a sign to his charge which Chris understood to be an imperious command to return to the east wing. Mr. Richard was as submissive as a lamb. Taking the young lady's hand for one moment in his, he pressed it for a moment in his own, and whispering in a very low voice, “Good-bye,” disappeared rapidly towards his rooms, returning by the north side of the house.

As soon as he was out of sight, his attendant shook his head gravely.

“It's a great risk we're all of us running, through my letting the young gentleman out, as I've done the last few days,” he said, in a warning voice ; “but he's begged so hard and he's behaved so well

that I've done it to keep him quiet for one thing, for fear he'd get out without my leave, instead of with it."

Here was her opportunity. In a voice which was one of earnest entreaty, Chris said :

"Why should he not be let out? He is not mad, you know he is not mad, Stelfox. You would never dare to let a man who was really insane go about as he has done the last few days. Why should you ever have been afraid to let him out? And why have you changed your mind now?"

Stelfox looked rather alarmed by the young lady's vehemence. He gave a glance round and made a gesture of warning, as if afraid they might be overheard ; but Chris went on in a reckless tone :

"I can't understand you. Either this unhappy man is mad, in which case he certainly ought not to come out at all, now more than at any other time, or he is not mad, in which case it is very wicked of Mr. Bradfield to shut him up, and very wicked of you to be quiet about it, and very silly of Mr. Richard himself not to get away when he can."

"Hush, ma'am, pray don't speak so loud ; you wouldn't if you knew the harm you might be doing the poor gentleman by it. Mr. Richard's mad, and he's not mad, and that's the truth. You can see for yourself there's something wrong with him," he went on, looking into the young lady's face, with an expression of some doubt and curiosity. He's reasonable enough in many ways, as I told you before. He's as mad as a hatter in his likes and dislikes. It's by his liking for you, ma'am, that I'm keeping him in order. But he hates Mr. Bradfield so much that if I were to allow him to meet my master alone, I wouldn't give

sixpence for Mr. Bradfield's chances of getting away from him alive."

The night air was clear and still, and keen with frost. The great evergreen oaks above them were lightly powdered with snow, which there was not even a breath of wind to shake off. For a moment after Stelfox had uttered these words there was a dead, silent calm, which increased the dread roused by the man's words in poor Chris.

Then, from the north side of the house, there came suddenly, piercing their ears, a ringing cry of "Help—help!"

Then there came a crash, the sound of a heavy fall, and then again perfect stillness

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN AWKWARD QUESTION.

WHEN the ladies left the dining-room, a spirit very different from the kindly geniality, conventionally supposed to belong to the Christmas season, reigned over the revels there. Alfred Marrable was, under the influence of the best dinner he had tasted for a long time, merry enough and to spare ; while Donald also found happiness in French plums and champagne. But a spirit of mischief looked out of Mr Graham-Shute's grey eyes, while John Bradfield himself sat on thorns. For Marrable would take no hint to be more reserved. As he would have expressed his feelings had he been asked, this child of misfortune was, for once in a way, enjoying himself, and he did not mean to let his enjoyment be interfered with. So, having got a sympathetic ear, as he thought, into which to pour his troubles, he maundered on about the old times to his heart's content ; for John Bradfield, who knew how obstinate his cousin could be, and how maliciously bent he was on encouraging Marrable, dared not bring worse upon himself by active interference.

"Yes," murmured he, with a mournful sigh, as Mr. Graham-Shute filled his proffered glass for him, "some are born lucky, and some unlucky, there's no denying that. Now to see all of us three together, Gilbert Wryde, our friend John there, and your humble servant, I don't think anybody could have

foretold how we were going to end. You might have known that Wryde would get on, perhaps—he was a clever fellow, with a head on his shoulders—but take old John and me, now! Not that I'm saying John hasn't got a head on his shoulders—he's proved it, we'll all admit; but he didn't bear his head so bravely in those days, didn't dear old John, when he was down on his luck out in Melbourne. Why, many's the time I've said to him, 'Pluck up, old chap, there'll be piping times for us yet,' and the piping times have come sure enough, haven't they, dear old chap?"

As each mention of his host's name grew more familiar, and more affectionate than the last, the scowl on John Bradfield's face grew blacker, and the mischievous twinkle in Mr. Graham-Shute's eyes grew more evident. Even Donald began to look from one to the other, and to say to himself, with the innocent enjoyment of sport peculiar to youth, that there "would be a jolly shindy presently."

The first thunder-clap came from Mr. Bradfield, who suggested at an unusually early stage of proceedings, an adjournment to the drawing-room. But the period of Alfred Marrable's modest reticence was over, and he protested, with indecorous loudness:

"No—no, dear old chap, not yet. Just when we're beginning to enjoy ourselves!" He was not in a condition to observe that this was by no means the case with all of them. "Let's be happy while we can, and let's get thoroughly warmed before we have to meet Old Mother Iceberg again!" added Marrable, with a chuckle, believing himself to be uttering a witticism which the company would fully appreciate, and forgetting, poor man, the relationship in which "Old Mother Iceberg" stood to two of them.

A slight pause followed this speech ; but Marrable was too happy in the sound of his own voice again to remain long silent.

"Yes, as I was saying," he pursued, shaking his head sagely, and wondering what it was that made the nuts slip through the crackers instead of letting themselves be cracked in the orthodox manner, "some are born lucky, and some of us aren't. Here's John, with an income like a prince's, and not a chick or child to leave it to, while I'm struggling along, picking up a pound where I can, as I can, and with three other mouths to fill beside my own. By-the bye, John," and he suddenly looked up and spoke in a brighter tone under the influence of a brand new idea, "what a precious lucky chap that young son of Gilbert Wryde's is, to come into a big fortune like his father's without having to do a stroke of work for it."

John Bradfield's face grew grey at these words. His throat had become in a moment so dry, that the words he tried to utter in answer or comment would not come, but resolved themselves into a choking cough. Nobody noticed this, for the Graham-Shutes had their attention fully taken up with Marrable himself. So Alfred went on with a sentimental cheerfulness:

"Why, that young fellow was born with a golden spoon in his mouth, and no mistake. Let's see, he must be three or four and twenty by this time. Wish I could come across him ! If he's anything like a chip of the old block, it would be a good day for me if I did. What d—d slippery nutcrackers these are of yours, John ! Do you know what's become of young Wryde, eh? "

"I haven't the least idea," answered John Bradfield, as, his patience worn out, he rose from the table. "As his father died in Australia, I should think your best chance of hearing of him would be to prosecute your inquiries over there."

Alfred Marrable, who had by this time, not without a little difficulty, gained his feet, stared at his old friend and host with a sudden portentous gravity. His familiarity, his affectionateness were gone; in their place was the solemnity of outraged dignity. Supporting himself with one hand against the table, and nodding two or three times before he spoke, to prepare his friend for the awful change which had come over his sentiments, he said, in a spasmodic and tremulous voice :

"Mr. Bradfield, I beg your pardon. I repeat," said he, with another dignified pause, "I repeat, I beg your pardon. If I had known, I should say, if I had been aware that my presence in Australia would be considered more desirable to you than my presence here, I would have gone there—I say, sir, I would have gone there, sooner than intrude here, where I am not wanted, where," and he looked round at the Graham-Shutes, and felt a muddled surprise to note that they looked more amused than sympathetic, "where it seems I am not wanted. It is not too late, while a railway line runs between here and London, to repair my er—er—error." Drawing himself up to his full height, Mr. Marrable concluded, "I wish you all, gentlemen"—here he paused a little, for effect with disastrous results—"I wish you all a ver—happy—new—year."

Unfortunately for the dignity of his exit, Alfred Marrable forgot that he had John Bradfield's clothes

on. And the appearance of his portly figure, with the arms drawn back by the tight fit of his coat, and a series of ridges between the shoulders not intended by the tailor, was more provocative of laughter than of indignant sorrow.

As the unlucky Marrable left the room, an expression of hope appeared on John Bradfield's face which became one of intense relief when, following his old chum into the hall, he saw that the latter was sincere in his intention of immediately leaving the house in which he chose to think he had been insulted. Taking his overcoat, a sadly threadbare garment, from the peg on which John Bradfield himself had hung it, Alfred buttoned himself up in it with great dignity, and proceeding down the inner and the outer hall with slow steps, perhaps willing to be called back, he fumbled at the handle of the front door, and finally let himself out into the cold night.

Just as Mr. Bradfield was congratulating himself upon having got rid of a dangerous and untrustworthy person, and wondering whether he should be troubled with him again, a voice close to his shoulder disturbed his reflections.

It was that of his cousin, Graham-Shute, who had witnessed the abrupt departure of the humble friend, and who had been struck by the fact that Alfred Marrable, confused as he was, had conceived a just opinion of the value of his old friend's welcome.

"I say, Bradfield, you're not going to let the poor chap go off like that, are you?"

John Bradfield turned upon him savagely.

"Why not? He chose to go. I couldn't keep the fool against his will, could I?"

"But—but—but d—— it, man, you're not serious! This fellow helped you when you were a young man, and you turn him out of the house like a dog, on a night like this?"

John Bradfield turned upon him sharply.

"Helped me! Who says he helped me! The man's a born fool, and never helped anyone, even himself."

But Mr. Graham-Shute was already at the front door. Before he had time to open it, however, both he and his host were startled by a loud cry of "Help, help!" in Marrable's voice.

It was John Bradfield's turn to be excited. Pushing past his cousin, he drew back the handle of the front door, and was out upon the stone steps in time to see dimly a man disappearing in the direction of the east wing. Then he turned his attention to Marrable, who had fallen down the steps, and was lying motionless at the bottom. He was not insensible, however; for John Bradfield had no sooner bent over him with a face full of anxiety which was not tender, than Alfred, struggling to sit up, said, in a hoarse whisper:

"John, I've seen a ghost, I swear I have, the ghost of Gilbert Wryde!"

John drew back his head, and affected to laugh boisterously; this merriment was as much for the benefit of his cousin as of Alfred, for the former was now hurrying down the steps with ears and eyes very much on the alert.

"Gilbert Wryde!" echoed Bradfield. "Why, he's been dead these sixteen years; you know that as well as I do."

And he turned to his cousin with a gesture to

intimate the tremendous extent to which his potations had affected poor Alfred's vision.

But Mr. Graham-Shute had put up his double eye-glasses, and was examining the prostrate man with attentive eyes. He shook his head slowly in answer to his cousin's gesture.

"He's sober enough now," he said, briefly.

Indeed, poor Marrable had been startled into sobriety compared to which that of the proverbial judge is levity itself. He now turned his eyes slowly from the spot at which he had last seen the vision which had startled him, and fixed them on John Bradfield's face.

"He went round there," he said, emphatically. "I'm positive. I can swear it—Gilbert Wryde!"

John Bradfield felt that his teeth were chattering. He could scarcely command his voice to answer in his usual tones :

"One of the gardeners, most likely."

Marrable shook his head emphatically.

"It was not one of the gardeners," he said, with a great deal more decision than he usually showed. "I won't trouble you again, John, but I will find out what I want to know before I leave this place."

He was trying to rise, and Mr. Graham-Shute helped him. But he could only move with difficulty, having sprained his left ankle in his fall.

"Here, Bradfield, send some of your men to take him indoors," said Mr. Graham-Shute, in a peremptory manner.

"Of course, of course!" assented John Bradfield.

And he gave the necessary orders to two men-servants who had by this time appeared in the doorway.

So Alfred Marrable, protesting all the time with more than his usual vigour, was carried indoors, and placed by John Bradfield's orders in a spare room, which was next to his own bedroom. Then with much reluctance, and more by his cousin's orders than by his own, John sent for a doctor.

In the meantime he suddenly developed a solicitude for his unlucky friend as striking as his previous neglect. He insisted on remaining himself by the side of the injured man until the arrival of the doctor, and, for fear of exciting him, as he said, he would allow no one to enter the room but himself.

When Stelfox knocked at the bedroom door, and, in his extremely quiet and respectful manner offered his services to wait on the gentleman, John Bradfield answered him very shortly indeed, with a scowl upon his face.

"No, I don't want you. And you would be better employed in looking after that lunatic of yours, and in keeping him from frightening people half out of their wits, than in attending to other folks' business."

Stelfox listened to this rebuke in meek silence, with his eyes upon the ground. When his master had finished speaking, he respectfully retired without a word, either of protest or of excuse.

John Bradfield watched him retreat with a malignant expression of face. He had serious cause of dissatisfaction with Stelfox, but he was not sure whether it would be wise in him to show it; for John felt that he was standing on a volcano, and that an eruption might take place at any minute. He was just forming in his mind the resolution to keep Marrable and the astute Stelfox apart, when he heard

a noise behind him, and turning, found that Marrable had got off the bed on which he had been placed, and in spite of the pain his ankle gave him, was dragging himself along, by the help of the furniture, towards the door.

"What are you doing? Where are you coming to?" asked John, sharply, as he sprang towards the injured man to help him back to bed. "You mustn't move until the doctor has seen you. We've sent for him, and he will be here in a few minutes."

There was nothing about which John Bradfield was more anxious than the prevention of a meeting between Marrable and Stelfox, whom he strongly suspected of an unwholesome curiosity. But the injured man was excited and obstinate; and he almost forgot the pain his ankle was causing him as he clung to John Bradfield's arm, and whispered, hoarsely :

"What was that you said about a lunatic? Let me speak to the man, John; let me speak to him! I must get to the root of this, or I shall go mad myself!"

John Bradfield saw that the man was thoroughly frightened, and within an ace of becoming noisy in his vehement questionings. So he said that if Alfred would be quiet, and allow himself to be helped back on to the bed, he should learn all about it.

"What I want to know is," said Marrable, sticking to his point when his host showed anew a disposition to dally with his promised explanation, "who the man was that I saw? And who the lunatic is you spoke about, and where he lives?"

"The lunatic is the man you saw," answered John Bradfield, doggedly, when he could fence on longer.

"I took him in myself out of charity, and he lives under my roof."

"But how does he come to be the image of Gilbert Wryde?" persisted Marrable.

"How should I know? It's a chance resemblance, that all. It was on account of that likeness that I was attracted to him, and took pity on him, and brought him into my own house," added Bradfield, with a happy thought.

Alfred Marrable had become, under the influence of his feeling of resentment against Bradfield, as obstinate as he usually was yielding. He raised himself once more from his bed.

"Let me see him," he said, sullenly.

And as Bradfield tried to soothe him, he called out all the more loudly :

"Let me see him, John. I will see him."

So that at last John, fearing that by the time the doctor arrived Marrable would be beyond control altogether, and hearing the footsteps of the curious in the corridor outside, made a virtue of necessity.

"Be quiet!" said he, between his clenched teeth. "Be quiet, can't you, and listen to me. The man you saw is a dangerous madman; and he is Gilbert Wryde's son."

Marrable sank down on the bed, trembling as if with severe cold.

"Gilbert Wryde's son—a lunatic!" he repeated, in horror. "It is too awful! It can't be true!"

Now that he had shot his bolt, John Bradfield was calmer in manner, and able to assume an appearance almost of indifference to the ejaculations and comments of the other.

"If you don't believe it, you can easily see for your-

self," he said, shortly. "As soon as you can move about, you shall be shut up with him alone for an hour if you like."

But Marrable sat in a heap, with staring eyes, and with his teeth chattering, muttering to himself at intervals :

"Gilbert Wryde's son a lunatic! Gilbert Wryde's son!"

And then the man, who was soft-hearted, and who remembered how Gilbert Wryde had befriended him years ago, broke down, and sobbed, while Bradfield moved restlessly about the room, waiting for the doctor.

When the medical man arrived, he pronounced the injury to be of a comparatively slight nature, and told the patient that he might, with care, be able to get about again in a fortnight or three weeks.

"But," he added, looking from one man to the other enquiringly, and perceiving that both were in a state of high excitement, "you will have to keep very quiet if you wish to be cured so soon."

John Bradfield went as far as the end of the corridor with the doctor, and then returned to the patient, whom he found resting on his elbow, with an inquiry on his lips. And John "shied," so to speak, at the expression of Marrable's light grey eyes.

"Bradfield!" said he, in a husky whisper, "I want to ask you something. If the poor chap you've got shut up for a lunatic is Gilbert Wryde's son, what has become of Gilbert Wryde's money?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LUNATIC'S LETTER.

JOHN BRADFELD was equal to the occasion. Turning so that he faced Marrable, he answered at once :

"Gilbert Wryde's money ! Oh, he left it in the hands of trustees, of course."

There was a pause, and John turned away, as if feeling that he had satisfied his companion's thirst for information. But presently Marrable spoke again, and his manner was somewhat lacking in that respect for the rich man which had characterised it on his first arrival :

"You're one of the trustees, I suppose ?"

John Bradfield, very unused of late years to being spoken to in this way, answered curtly enough :

"Yes, I'm one of them. Anything more you want to know ?"

"Only this—who are the others ?"

"Men you've never heard of. Old chums of Wryde's."

"Do they live in England ?"

"No ; out in Australia."

"Oh !"

This exclamation might be taken as signifying assent, and it was thus that John Bradfield chose to take it ; and the subject was dropped out of their talk, if not out of their minds.

The assiduity with which John Bradfield tended his old friend was wonderful. It was remarked that he

scarcely let anybody else go near him ; that he slept in Marrable's room, and even served him with his own hands. It escaped remark that on rare occasions when John Bradfield did leave the apartment of his friend, he took care first to send Stelfox out on some errand which would take a considerable time to execute.

Mr. Bradfield's doubts of Stelfox's trustworthiness were increasing. Taking the bull by the horns, as his custom was when hard pressed, Mr. Bradfield took the servant severely to task for suffering Mr. Richard to get loose again, and ended by threatening him with instant dismissal if it should occur again.

At this Stelfox looked up.

"Do you mean that, sir?"

"I do, indeed."

"And what—what, sir, would you do with Mr. Richard, if you did send me away?"

There was some spirit in the servant's question ; there was more in the master's answer :

"That's my business!"

And Stelfox, with a glance at his master's resolute face, made submission.

The day following the accident being Boxing-day, Mrs. Graham-Shute asked and obtained permission from her host to extend her visit, and that of her family, until the day after. It was impossible to go out, much less to travel, on such a day as that, she said.

In spite of this impossibility, however, Mrs. Graham-Shute stayed out nearly the whole of the morning, looking for a suitable house in which she could settle with her family, to fulfil her kind promise of "looking after dear cousin John." Of course, it was the worst

day she could have chosen for her expedition, as the agents' offices were closed, and the caretakers were making a holiday. But, being a woman of great valour and determination, just when these qualities were unnecessary and inconvenient, she ferreted out the unhappy agents, and made them unlock their books for her benefit, and she chivied the caretakers away from their dinners to attend her over the empty houses, only to declare at the end of the day's work that she had never met such an uncivil set of people in her life—never!

Mrs. Graham-Shute found, moreover, cause of bitter complaint in other directions. The rents were absurdly high, for one thing. She had imagined that in a hole of a place like this you would be able to pick up a house, with thirteen rooms and a nice garden, for next to nothing. Indeed, to hear her talk, one would have imagined that she looked upon the honour done to a dwelling by her residence within its walls as an equivalent to rent and taxes. The poor lady was quite hurt at the local ingratitude. It was enough, as she said at luncheon-time, to the amusement of dear cousin John, to make one stay in town.

"Why on earth don't you, my dear?" murmured her husband, who had strenuously opposed the proposed flight to this clubless and remote region, and who knew very well that the love of change had much to do with his wife's determination to move; and the belief that she would be a great person down here, while in town it had been forced upon her that she was only a very small one indeed.

His wife looked at him reproachfully.

"My dear, you know as well as possible that we

must economise for the sake of the children," she said, with a sigh and a glance at her cousin, as if sure that he would approve her sentiments.

It was fashionable to economise, so Mrs. Graham-Shute was always talking about it; and there it ended. Her husband had suffered from this idiosyncrasy, and he went on in an aggrieved tone:

"Why can't you begin at Bayswater, and save moving expenses? Everything's cheaper in town than here, and you've something to talk about besides the health of the pigs."

But Maude went breezily on:

"Ah, but in town you're tempted to buy things; my feminine heart can't resist a bargain. Now, here," she ended triumphantly, "you can't spend money, because there's nothing to buy!"

Here John Bradfield struck into the conversation.

"Isn't there, though? There are bargains to be had here as well as in town, as I have found to my cost."

Maude smiled at this remark, having only frowned at her husband's. And, of course, she remained unconvinced.

Mrs. Graham-Shute spent her own and her daughters' afternoon in making a list of the houses they had seen, with their several defects and good qualities. The former consisted, not in imperfect drainage and "stuffy" bed-rooms, but in "reception rooms" too small for the entertainments by which she proposed to dazzle the neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, Donald, left to his own devices, tried hard to contrive an interview with Chris, who had, during the last day or two, avoided him with a persistency which nettled him exceedingly. During the

last conversation he had had with her, she had reproached him with following her about at the suggestion of his mother. While greatly annoyed and offended by her perspicacity, it had not made him less anxious for the flirtation he had promised himself with such an "awfully pretty girl." This being the last day of his stay at Wyngnam Lodge, he felt that he must come to such an understanding with her as would pave the way for a welcome when he and his family should return to Wyngnam for a permanent residence.

When, therefore, Donald saw Chris walking in the garden, he put on his hat and sauntered out there too. It was on the south side of the house that Chris was walking, and she appeared to be looking at nothing but the sea. As she drew near the east wing, however, she glanced up from time to time shyly at the windows. On hearing footsteps on the path behind her, she turned quickly, and flushed, with an unmistakable expression of disappointment, on coming face to face with Donald. He was taken aback ; his vanity was wounded ; and instead of addressing her as he had intended, he stepped aside for her to pass him, and followed the path she had been taking towards the east-end of the house. Angry and mortified, he went on as far as the enclosed portion of the grounds. And here, lying on the ground just within the locked gate, he saw an envelope lying on the damp grass. Stooping, and putting his hand through the wire fence, he found that the envelope was just within his reach. Drawing it through, he discovered that it contained a letter, that it was directed to "Miss Christina Abercarne," and that it was too dry to have lain there long.

While he was turning the missive over in his hand, and looking about him, considering from what quarter the letter could have come, Chris bore down upon him with a crimson face and very bright eyes.

"That note is for me, is it not?" said she, as she managed to see the superscription.

Now Donald was not particularly chivalrous, and he thought it quite fair that he should find some advantage to himself in his discovery. So he said, holding the letter behind him:

"What are you going to give me not to tell?"

Chris drew herself up haughtily.

"I am not going to give you anything, Mr. Shute. But you will have to give me my letter."

"And you won't mind if I repeat this little anecdote, say, at the dinner-table to-night?"

"Not a bit. And you, I dare say, won't mind what I shall think of you?"

It was his turn to blush now. He stammered out that, of course, he was only in fun, and he handed her the letter in the most sheepish and shame-faced manner. Although she took it from him very coolly, to all appearance, a strange thrill went through her as she held it, and knew unfamiliar as the handwriting was, from whom it came.

Donald stared at her. For there had flashed over her face a strange look, half gladness, half sorrow, and he felt with jealousy that some other man had roused in her the feeling he would have liked her to have for himself. For a moment she seemed hardly conscious that she was not alone; then recovering herself quickly, she remembered that this wretched youth had the power, if he liked, to increase the mis-

fortunes of a man who was unlucky enough already. So she said, catching her breath, and speaking with a most eloquent moisture in her eyes, and with a tremor in her voice which few male creatures could have resisted :

“Of course—I believe you, I believe what you said—that you were only in fun. You would not care to bring real misery upon—anybody, would you?”

Donald was touched, and he reddened, under the influence of a kindly emotion, even more deeply than he had done with anger.

“You may trust me,” was all he said.

Christina held out her hand, taking it away again, however, before he had time to do more than hold it for a half second in his.

“Thank you—very much,” said she, as she hurried away.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN APPEAL.

CHRIS walked as long as she could be seen by Donald ; but as soon as she was out of his sight, she ran. Into the house, up the stairs, never taking breath until she had shut herself into the dressing-room, and turned the key in the lock. Then she took out the precious letter, her eyes so dim that at first she could scarcely read it. When at last she had conquered her agitation sufficiently to do so, she read the following words, written in a bold, clear hand :

“You must forgive,” so it began, without any heading, “all that is strange, all that is wrong in this letter, for it is the first I have ever written. If my words are like those of a savage you must forgive that too, for it is not my fault. I have lived alone for years that I cannot count, but it is nearly all my life, ever since my father died. I have been miserable enough, and yet I never knew what misery was until I saw you. Neither have I ever known what joy was until I looked into your eyes and touched your hand. You have opened the world to me. You have woke me out of a long sleep. You have given me heart and courage, you have saved me from becoming what they pretend that I already am. I had thought myself an outcast from all the world ; long ago I had forgotten what hope was, when you came here like a

ray of sunshine and changed the whole face of the world for me. I scarcely know how to go on. I am afraid to offend you, afraid that you will not believe what I say. But you are kind, you are good ; and as I cannot see you again I must write. I ask you just this one thing ; it is a favour I think you will not refuse. Come into the enclosed garden under my window every day, at any time, if only for five minutes, and let me see you. I know the gates are kept locked, but you will be able to do this if you will, for if you ask for the key you will get it, as nobody could resist you.

“One more thing I beg you to do. Be silent about me to the man who keeps me here. If you intercede for me you will only do me harm. I don't know myself why he keeps me here ; he has never even let me know my own name. I know, as you know, that I am cursed with an infirmity which condemns me to a solitary life ; but I ask you to judge whether it was necessary to treat me as I have been treated. I know he pretends that I am dangerous ; and he has just this excuse, that, as far as he is concerned, he has made me so. But I will not write to you of him. The time for me to call him to account is nearer than he thinks.

“If I see you in the garden to-morrow I shall know that you have found my letter, and that you forgive me.

“DICK.”

Chris had been interested in Mr. Richard. She had known of this interest, which had seemed to be occasioned by pity only. Now that she held his letter in her hands, and pressed it against her lips

she knew more than this. She knew that the feeling she had for the forlorn recluse was something deeper, more tender than pity. She knew that she loved him.

When she went downstairs to dinner, her face seemed transfigured, her fresh beauty had never been so brilliant. All eyes were attracted by the delicate colour in her cheeks, by the brightness of her eyes; and Donald, who guessed the cause for this unusual radiance, was jealous and sullen throughout the meal.

The next day was that of the Graham-Shutes departure. The fair Maude thought it only right to warn her dear cousin John, before she went, to be on his guard against the Abercarnes, as they were very designing people. Dear cousin John retorted with a bombshell:

"I hope, my dear Maude," said he, coolly, "that one of them will no longer be an Abercarne by the time I see you again."

Crestfallen, the poor lady pretended not to understand. So John remorselessly explained:

"Why, I hope to make Christina Mrs. John Bradfield before many weeks are over."

Poor Mrs. Graham-Shute drew a long breath. At last she said:

"Whatever you do, of course, you have my best wishes for your happiness. But—lucky as you are, John," she ended, with spiteful emphasis, "I wouldn't tempt Providence too far, if I were you!"

To which dear John answered by a roar of derisive laughter, which made Maude say to her husband, as they drove away, that, under the influence of those two harpies, John's manners were deteriorating greatly.

John Bradfield went back into the house quickly after seeing his cousin off; he ran upstairs, and was in time to catch sight of Stelfox hovering about the doorway of the injured Marrable. John's expression grew threatening. There was danger, danger too great to be tolerated, in the meeting of these two men. Each of the two possessed the links which the other lacked in a chain of facts, which, if known, would be John Bradfield's ruin. With a black frown on his face, the master of the house opened the door of the sick-room quietly, and walked to the bedside.

Poor Marrable had begged to get up that day, being, indeed, quite well enough to do so. But John had insisted on his remaining in bed, apparently out of solicitude for his friend, but really in order that he might the more easily keep him under his own eye. Alfred appeared to be asleep. John Bradfield glared at him ferociously. With this man was the key to John's fate. The knowledge he held of the past life of his old chum was shared by nobody else on this side of the ocean. With these thoughts passing through his mind, John Bradfield almost involuntarily began to lift up, one by one, the various bottles, some containing medicines, and some lotions for outward application, which stood upon the table.

Suddenly Alfred sprang up in bed, and stared at him with feverish eyes.

"There, there, there!" he cried, as if fear and indignation had deprived him of words. "Do you want to poison me? I believe you do. I can't make you out, John. I'm afraid of you. You're not the same man I used to know, and I'll not stay under your roof another night! I tell you, I'm afraid of you."

Remonstrance was useless • but indeed his host did

not press him very much to stay ; his chief wish now was to get his guest out of the house before Stelfox could learn his intention to go. In this he succeeded. Ordering the landau to be brought round, he himself helped Marrable downstairs, accompanied him to the station, reserved a first-class compartment for him, and made him as comfortable as he could with rugs and wraps. Then he looked in at the carriage window and spoke to him in tones to which joy at his departure lent an appearance of real warmth.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I am afraid ours has been an unlucky meeting after all these years. But I've been worried lately ; I'm not myself at all. But I'm not one to forget my old friends, and so you'll find when you get back to town, if you'll open this," and he handed Marrable a large envelope sealed with red wax. "Just send me your address when you get home, and let me know whenever you change it. And every quarter you shall have a similar little packet from me as long as you need it, for auld lang syne. And a happy new year to you, old man."

So saying, John Bradfield wrung his friend's hand with a heartiness which soothed Marrable's wounded feelings, and even went far, for the moment at least, towards deceiving him as to his friend's real sentiments.

John Bradfield went home with a lighter heart. Here was one danger got over, for the present at least. There remained one other to be grappled with ; that other was—Stelfox.

There could be little doubt that the man-servant had of late formed some sort of league against his master with that master's victim, and Mr. Bradfield was anxious to know the exact terms of the compact.

On reaching home, therefore, he condescended to play the spy, and with this object watched his opportunity, and when Stelfox unlocked the door of Mr. Richard's apartments and went in, Mr. Bradfield followed him, entering by means of a duplicate key of his own.

Between the outer door by which he had just passed in, and the door of Mr. Richard's sitting-room, there was a passage, very dark and very narrow, lighted only by a little square window in the centre of the inner door, which had been made for secret observation, by Mr. Bradfield's order, of the lunatic's movements.

Mr. Bradfield was advancing with cautious steps towards this window when he suddenly paused, struck motionless with terror. And yet he could see nothing, he could not even distinctly hear the words that were being exchanged in the room. All that he knew, in fact, was that he heard two voices in conversation. After a few moments of absolute stillness and hideous terror, he moved spasmodically forward to the inner door and looked through the little square window. All that he saw was Mr. Richard, seated at the table talking to Stelfox, who stood respectfully before him.

Mr. Bradfield drew a long, gasping breath; made his way, stumbling at every other step, back through the passage on to the landing at the head of the staircase outside. There he made one step in the direction of the stairs, staggered, and fell down, gasping, unconscious, digging his nails into the flesh of his hands

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SECRET CORRESPONDENCE.

A BEAUTIFUL peace had descended upon Wyngham House on the departure of the Graham-Shutes. There were no more scurryings up and down stairs on unimportant errands; no more conversations carried on at opposite ends of the house. Mrs. Abercarne rejoiced articulately in the change; but to Chris the satisfaction brought by the change was tempered by many things.

For one thing, the girl was troubled by the consciousness that she was not acting quite openly, and by a fear of what the consequences would be if she were to do so. Her first meetings with Mr. Richard she had concealed from her mother for a perfectly good and honest reason, the fear of giving Mrs. Abercarne unnecessary alarm. Later, when she had begun to feel sure that Mr. Richard was not so mad as was supposed, Chris had thought it a pity to worry her mother with her story while Mrs. Abercarne spent her days in a tempest of irritation against her declared enemy, Mrs. Graham-Shute.

But now these excuses for reticence had disappeared, and still she hesitated to confide in her mother. For her confidence, if it was to be in any way genuine or whole-hearted, must now be in the nature of a confession. She did not now try to cheat herself into the belief that she had no deeply personal interest in the occupant of the east wing; indeed,

all her thoughts were occupied in wondering why he was kept there, and in devising schemes for releasing him from his unhappy position. Certain words he had used in his letter had struck her to the heart. He had mentioned the infirmity she must have noticed ; so that Chris, even in spite of herself, was obliged to admit that her lover, although not insane, for that she refused to believe, suffered from sudden lapses of memory, or fits of unconsciousness, which would certainly make him, in her mother's eyes, a "most ineligible person," while his eccentric habit of silence would increase this impression. For Mrs. Abercarne would not be ready, as Chris was, to explain these things tenderly away, and account for them by his long and enforced seclusion.

So that Chris seemed rather depressed than exhilarated by the departure of the noisy relations, whose presence had made it easier for her to hide her secret troubles from her mother.

Mr. Bradfield also suffered from the departure of his guests ; at least, that was the inference Mrs. Abercarne drew, with some asperity, from his gloomy looks. But, in truth, although the sudden change from excessive noise to excessive tranquillity proved trying to his nerves, the causes of Mr. Bradfield's uneasiness had a much deeper root than this.

He was brooding over the consciousness of a crime which would not have troubled him in the least, but for the fear he now entertained that he would be found out.

Now John Bradfield's roughness and abruptness of manner were not accompanied by as much energy of character as might have been supposed. Nor was he a man possessed of much fertility of invention or

resource. Therefore, although conscious that the cunning Stelfox was in possession of certain knowledge which he had concealed from his master, John Bradfield vacillated between two courses; the one was to come to an understanding with the servant, the other was to let things go on for a while and await fresh developments before embarking on a hazardous course of action.

He decided on the latter course.

In the meantime, Chris had felt bound to answer Mr. Richard's letter. She had not dared to confide even in Stelfox, partly because he was too reticent, and partly from a delicacy in letting the man know of her secret correspondence with his charge. It was with a fast-beating heart that she, after watching for her opportunity, slipped under the locked door of the east wing the following answer to Mr. Richard's letter:

"I received your letter. I must tell you first that I have never before received a letter without showing it to my mother, at least since I was a little girl, when I had lots of letters, with toffee and flowers, from my boy-sweethearts, which I did not show, because my mother would have made me give up the toffee. I do not like writing now without telling her about it, and yet, on the other hand, I cannot bear to leave your note unanswered. So please do not write to me again, not, at least, unless you have something very, *very* particular to say about anything, for instance, in which I can help you. I am very much troubled by what you say about the person you mentioned. I cannot believe that person guilty of the deliberate cruelty and wickedness you suggest. Won't you let

me speak ? It would be better, believe me. I know that I am not a proper person to give advice to anybody ; I am supposed to be too silly to be capable of such a thing. But if I were a person of more authority, who would be listened to, I would say : Go to that person and ask that person to tell you about yourself, and *insist* upon knowing. Then I believe that person will have to give way.

“And now please remember that you are not to write to me, because it puts me in a great difficulty when you do. For, on the one hand, I cannot bear not to answer, when you are so lonely ; and, on the other hand, I can’t bear to do anything underhand, that I can’t tell my mother about. It makes me feel quite wicked. And yet, if I did tell her, I know she would tell a certain person, or else she would insist upon our going away, and there would be dreadful scenes.

“I know this is a dreadfully stupid letter, and I am almost ashamed to send it ; if I do, I shall post it under the door. But please, please believe that I am very, very sorry about it all, and that I do hope you will take the advice I should like to give you if I dared.

“Yours—” (she debated within herself for a long time how she should end, without being too forward, too formal, too affectionate or too cold)—“sincerely,
“CHRIS ABERCARNE.”

“I can’t put ‘Christina,’ it’s simply too horrid,” she said to herself, as she looked sideways at the letter ; “it’s a dreadfully bad letter, just such a letter as Miss Smithson used to say a lady ought not to write ; full of ‘that person,’ and ‘can’t,’ instead of ‘cannot.’”

And it gets worse, instead of better, as it goes on. However, I don't think there are any sentences without heads or tails, and if there are, why, he shouldn't write to a girl if he expects grammar. I think," she went on, a little blush rising to her face as the thought came into her mind, "that I may give it just one, to help it on its way."

And, laughing to herself, she pressed the letter to her pretty red lips.

Now if Chris had been a really conscientious and strong-minded girl, instead of the perfect fool her kind friends declared her to be, she would have been quite satisfied with having put an end to her correspondence with Mr. Richard, and would have been shocked at the idea of his wishing to carry it on. It is sad, therefore, to be obliged to relate that every morning, while taking her walk in the enclosed garden, as he had begged her to do (for Johnson proved delightfully corruptible), she cast an inquiring glance towards the spot where she had found Mr. Richard's first letter.

And, all things considered, it is not surprising that before long she found a second.

She had given him fresh hope, fresh courage, he said. But again he begged her to say nothing on his behalf to anybody, assuring her that before very long he hoped to be able to act upon her advice, for which he thanked her most gratefully.

And then, after a day or two, during which she contented herself with glancing shyly up at his window, at one of which he was always to be seen watching her with very eloquent eyes, it began to seem rather cruel not to let him have just a few lines to assure him that she had received his letter.

So that another kind little missive got posted under the door of the east wing ; and though she begged again that he would not write to her, there was something about the injunction which made it read to the young man like an invitation. And so, with many qualms of conscience on the one side, at least, an intermittent correspondence went on, which became the happiness and the misery of the girl's life.

In the meantime, John Bradfield laid siege to her affections with a good deal of tact, inflicting upon her very little of his society, but anticipating her wishes in every possible way, until she found that he had gradually become the fountain-head of a great many pleasures which she would never have known but for him. She could not mention a book that she would like to read, a flower she was fond of, or a composer whose works she would like to study, without finding, in the course of the next few days, book, plant or music lying about as if it had found its way into her presence by magic. These attentions made Chris uncomfortable, and Mrs. Abercarne very happy. The latter thought it wiser to say nothing, and was deceived by her daughter's manner. For Chris, grateful on the one hand for Mr. Bradfield's kindness to herself, and anxious on the other to pave the way for coaxing him to do justice to his ward, acquired towards the master of the house a manner full of a sort of pleading diffidence, so that both her mother and Mr. Bradfield believed that the charm was beginning to work.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HOUSE-WARMING.

IT was about six weeks after Christmas when Mrs. Graham-Shute again descended upon Wyngham, not for mere invasion, but with a view to settling in the conquered country.

By the luckiest chance in the world (so *she* said) there was by this time a house to be let absolutely within sight of Wyngham House. It was an ugly brand-new dwelling, built of yellow brick, standing in a very small scrap of immature garden, on the west side of Wyngham House, and therefore a little way further from the town than Mr. Bradfield's residence. It had been built by the local poet, a gentleman who turned out a large amount of verse, mostly very bad, and always very dull, some of which occasionally found its way into the dullest and heaviest of the old established magazines. Overweighted by the burden of his own celebrity (at least this was the construction put upon his action by the neighbours) he had built a high wall round his house and tiny garden, to shield himself from the public gaze; although nobody wanted to look at him. Then, suddenly tiring of his dwelling when he had finished spoiling it, he put up a board announcing that it was to let, just in time for it to be pounced upon by the fair Maude, who was charmed by the dignified seclusion offered by the high wall, and by its near

neighbourhood to dear cousin John. Furthermore the house had what she described as a "magnificent entrance," which meant that a great deal of the space which ought to have been utilised in enlarging the poor little dining-room, was wasted on a big draughty hall, in which the four winds found a charming playground from which to distribute themselves up and down and around into every corner of the house. There was also a good-sized drawing-room, which was to be the scene of certain functions which were to bring a breath of Bayswater into benighted Wyng-ham.

Long before the harmless, necessary plumber was out of the house, long before the carpets were down or the new papers were dry, Mrs. Graham-Shute had resolved upon most of the details of a house-warming, which was to be remembered as an epoch in the local annals. In honour of the occasion, Lilith had fortunately discovered a talent for dramatic authorship, and had fashioned a play which was to be the chief feature of the evening's entertainment. Having got as far as this, Mrs. Graham-Shute, long before the moving was accomplished, proceeded to send out invitations to all those people whose acquaintance she had made, or had not made, as the case might be, during her week's stay at dear cousin John's. The next thing to be done was to call upon the editor of *The Wyngham Observer* (with which is incorporated *The Little Wosham Times*), to ask him to insert, under the heading of "A Distinguished Arrival," an account of the proposed function which she had thoughtfully written out beforehand. But the editor had, as she afterwards expressed it, "no enterprise, no manners, no anything," for he mildly in-

formed the lady that if he inserted her contribution it must be paid for as an advertisement.

Then began the first of the poor lady's difficulties. Of course she sent an invitation to dear cousin John. Equally, of course, she sent none to the housekeeper or the housekeeper's daughter. Then she received a blunt note from Mr. Bradfield, informing her that unless Mrs. and Miss Abercarne came too, he shouldn't come. Remonstrances followed, but were unavailing; then Mrs. Graham-Shute made a feeble stand; but the thought of what life would be at Wyngnam without the countenance of the Great Man prevailed, and Mrs. and Miss Abercarne got their invitation, which Mr. Bradfield then put pressure on them to accept.

What a frantic state of excitement pervaded "The Cottage" on the day of the "function!" What skirmishes there were among the performers! What rushes into the town on the part of the younger members of the family for a pound of sweet biscuits, a packet of candles, sixpennyworth of daffodils, and two syphons of lemonade! Not to speak of a running stream of messengers to cousin John's, with pressing requests for the loan of a dozen chairs, a bottle of whisky and a tea-tray! As Mrs. Graham-Shute feelingly said, "It was quite lucky, as it happened, those wretched Abercarnes *had* been invited, you know!"

And so indeed it was. But when at last the evening came, Mrs. Graham-Shute felt that her exertions had met with their reward, for there was not a space sufficient for the accommodation of one person which did not hold two. This was the very height of enjoyment to the good lady, who received each guest with

a fixed, galvanic smile, and said she was "so delighted that you could come, you know," the while she looked over the shoulder of the guest whose hand she held, too obviously occupied in counting the number of people who pressed in behind. It was indeed, as she afterwards said, a most successful function. Number of guests, eighty—seats for thirty-five. Sandwiches for five-and-twenty; tea for all those enterprising and muscular enough to make their way into the dining-room, where Rose, feeble and frightened, drifted round the tea-table rather than presided at it.

There was some delay before the entertainment of the evening began; this is inevitable when you have to wait until the last guest has passed safely in before you can set your stage. By-the-bye, there was no stage proper, a space being railed off merely from the hall-door to about half-way up the hall, so that it was exceedingly disconcerting when the two Misses Blake, elderly and slow both of movement and understanding, knocked at the door at the most thrilling moment of the drama, and had to be let in right between the villain and the lady he was trying to murder. To avoid a second *contretemps* of the same kind, one of the younger children was told off to stand in the cold outside, to show late comers in by the back door.

Unluckily the play, a harmless charade of the forcible-feeble order, took place under some disadvantages. In the first place, as the stage was on the same level as the auditorium, only the people in the first two rows could see anything of what was going on. In the second place, the performers, although they were all dead-letter perfect, and had been pretty well rehearsed, had not mastered the acoustics of the hall, and were seldom heard. In the

third place, the seats were put so close together that everybody was on somebody else's toes, or else on somebody else's gown; and in the fourth place, the hall was so bitterly cold, and draughts blew in so steadily from under all the doors, that, compared with this improvised theatre, Mr. Bradfield's barn had been a warm and cosy place. The only things which everybody heard were the rat-tat-tats at the door, and subsequently the voice of the eldest Miss Blake, who sat in the front row, and inquired from time to time, plaintively, "What they were saying," and the answers which her obliging companion bawled in her ear.

However, Lilith, though not histrionically great, looked very pretty in grey hair, which made her young face look fresher than ever; and the place was crammed to suffocation. So Mrs. Graham-Shute, who panted complacently at the remotest end of the hall, and tried to console those who could neither see nor hear, and who were restrained by her presence from the solace of conversation, was quite satisfied. And when the play was over, and everybody jumped up and fled frantically in search of fire to thaw themselves, she received, in perfect good faith, their vague congratulations.

There was only one drawback to her happiness; this was the persistency with which cousin John devoted himself to "those Abercarnes."

Wherever Chris went, Mr. Bradfield followed, until, as Mrs. Graham-Shute said to Mrs. Browne:

"It really was quite a scandal, you know, and she could not understand how any right-minded girl could let herself be compromised like that!"

But Mrs. Browne, who was a good-natured old soul, only said that Chris was such a very pretty girl, that

if Mr. Bradfield didn't follow her about somebody else would, and that she didn't seem to encourage his attentions much. But this seemed to Mrs. Graham-Shute only a fresh injury, and she presently asked Donald, rather snappishly, to go and talk to that Abercarne girl, and distract her attention for a few moments, so that cousin John might have a few minutes to himself.

But Donald was angry, and said, sulkily, that he wasn't going to be snubbed again. The fact was that, presuming a little upon his knowledge of her receipt of the letter which he had found in the garden, he had already tried to force a *tête-à-tête* upon her. She had avoided it, and even spoken to him rather coldly; and Donald, who was neither young enough nor old enough for chivalry to be a strong point with him, had sworn revenge. So now he rushed at his opportunity.

"Snubbed!" echoed Mrs. Graham-Shute, scandalised; "a housekeeper's daughter to dare to snub *you*—a Graham-Shute—my son! No, no, Donald, you must have misunderstood her, you must really!"

"I know jolly well that I didn't misunderstand," blurted out Donald, in the usual highly-pitched family voice. "She simply dismissed me as if she'd been a princess, and I nobody at all, when all the time I could, if I liked——"

Here Donald paused, significantly, wishing to yield, with apparent reluctance, to his burning desire to betray the girl's little secret.

Mrs. Graham-Shute's face woke at once into eager interest. She was not at heart an ill-natured woman, and it would have given her no satisfaction to hear anything very dreadful to the girl's discredit. But

some trifling indiscretion, some girlish escapade, which it would annoy John Bradfield, and, perhaps, disgust him to know, that Mrs. Graham-Shute would have dearly liked to hear about.

"What is it! What is it she has done?" she asked, quickly. "You may tell your mother, you know. It is nothing serious, of course?"

"Well, I don't know," grumbled Donald, in a surly tone. "Some people might think it serious for a girl to keep up a correspondence with some fellow, who daren't send his letters by post!"

"What!" cried Mrs. Graham-Shute. "Ah!—are you sure of this, Donald?"

Nothing could be better than this, if it were only true. There was no great harm in it, but it was just the sort of thing to put an elderly admirer on his guard.

"Has she got you to take letters for her, then?" she asked in horror.

"Me? No—not such a fool!" returned Donald, shortly.

The lad was uneasy, being ashamed of himself for having betrayed the girl's confidence, forced though it had been, and afraid of the use his mother might make of it.

"Now, you won't go and make any mischief, will you, mother?" he said earnestly, alarmed by the expression of satisfaction on her face.

"I should think you might trust me," she said haughtily, as she moved away, anxious to make use, without delay, of her new weapon.

Having managed to detach cousin John momentarily from the Abercarnes, who were, in truth, glad of a little relief from his attentions, Mrs. Graham-

Shute asked her cousin to get her a cup of tea. He complied, and would immediately have escaped, but she detained him by bringing her fan down with a sharp snap on his arm.

"One moment, John; I think you might spare me one moment, especially as I want to talk to you about your favourites," she said, rather snappishly, as he reluctantly waited.

"Oh, if you're going on again about them," said John shortly, "you may save yourself the trouble. They *are* my favourites, and there's an end of it."

"Quite so," rejoined his cousin sweetly. "It's because of the great interest I know you take in them, that I want to speak to you. Who is this young fellow that Miss Abercarne is going to marry?"

This question, serenely put, though not without a strong touch of what a woman would have recognised as malice, had the desired effect of startling John Bradfield, as well as of making him very angry.

"What—what do you mean?" he asked shortly. "I've heard nothing about it. It's some d—d nonsense somebody's put into your head, and there's not a word of truth in it, I'll be bound."

"My dear John, don't be angry. Perhaps there is nothing; very likely not. If there had been anything in it, no doubt you would have heard. But as there's no doubt she's carrying on a correspondence with someone *who does not send his letters by post*, I naturally thought that it must be with someone she thought about rather seriously. I daresay I was wrong. So sorry if I've made any mischief!" she added, as if in sudden surprise at the effect of her words. "But really, you know, girls shouldn't do these things, now should they?"

Loud voices were the rule in the house, but Mrs. Graham-Shute was startled by the loudness of her cousin's angry reply :

"It isn't true!" roared he. "It isn't true. It's one of your infernal concoctions of a spiteful woman. I'll go and ask her."

"My dear John," cried Maude, without temper, for she could not afford to quarrel with him, "my dear John, just consider a moment? What possible object could I have in saying it if it were not true? I should expose myself to all sorts of horrid things, and really deserve to be called spiteful—and nobody can say that of me, really—if I said a thing like that when it was not true. Can't you see that for yourself?"

But John was blunt to the verge of rudeness.

"I can see that somebody's been telling lies," he said abruptly, as he turned on his heel, and fought his way back to where Chris was standing near her mother, who, having obtained one of the much-sought-after chairs, was lost to sight in the crowd of guests who had not been so lucky.

"Miss Christina!" said John Bradfield, not attempting to hide the fact that he was angry, "I've got something to say to you. Is it true that you're carrying on a correspondence with someone?"

Chris turned deadly white, and every spark of animation suddenly left her face. Her mother, who was of necessity so close to her that not a look nor a word could escape her, broke in sharply :

"Chris! why don't you answer? Ask who said such a thing. But of course I know who it was!"

And Mrs. Abercarne threw a steely glance towards the spot where Mrs. Graham-Shute's large head could

be seen bobbing amongst the throng, like a cork on a surging sea.

Still Chris made no answer, and her mother, suddenly perceiving how white she had grown, grew alarmed.

"Why don't you deny it, child?" she asked in a low voice, quivering with earnestness, as she rose to whisper in her daughter's ear.

The tears were in the girl's eyes. She turned to her mother, and under the pretence of drawing round her shoulders the China crape shawl which Mrs. Abercarne wore as a wrap, she whispered :

"Mother, don't be worried. But I can't deny it; it's true."

Poor Mrs. Abercarne was thunder-struck. If she had been told ten minutes before that it was possible for her Chris, her little girl, as she persisted in calling her, to be guilty of keeping a secret from her, she would have treated the idea with scorn. So that at the first moment she was absolutely at a loss for words, and could only murmur :

"You, Chris! You!" with quite pathetic amazement and grief.

As for John Bradfield, who stood near enough in the crush to catch the purport of their words, his amazement had given place to a great fear. He did not dare to ask any details concerning her correspondence; being deterred, not so much by the knowledge that he had no right to do so, as by an alarming suspicion as to the identity of the unknown lover.

Fortunately the assembled guests were now beginning to carry out their long-felt wish to be gone; so Mrs. Abercarne and her daughter took advantage

of the thinning of the crowd around them to make their escape also.

Mrs. Graham-Shute was bidding her guests farewell with the bored look which comes of the consciousness of duty fulfilled. As she shook hands and listened to their stereotyped words of thanks, she expressed the hope that they had enjoyed themselves, though she might have known they hadn't. Then they all trooped out, and drove or walked home, exchanging comments which would have taken the poor lady's breath away, and made her forswear the world for its base ingratitude.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NIGHT ALARMS.

"CHRIS, what does this mean?"

Wyngham House being so near, Mrs. Abercarne and her daughter had returned on foot. They had not exchanged a single word on the way. It was not until they had reached the Chinese-room, and had sat down before the fire there, that Mrs. Abercarne thus broke the silence portentously.

Chris looked the picture of despair. The colour had again left her pretty cheeks; there were lines brought by anxiety in her fair young face; the tears were gathering in her eyes. And yet there was something comical in the look of resignation with which she deliberately sat down as soon as her mother had done so, determined to brave the matter out, and get her confession and her scolding over and done with.

At her mother's question, therefore, she drew a sigh which sounded like one of relief.

"It means, mother dear," she began, frankly, "that—oh! dear, I know you'll be so angry! And it will worry you besides! I wish you wouldn't ask me. You might take it for granted I haven't done anything dreadful, nothing more than I used to do when I was twelve, when I used to find love letters from Willie Mansfield behind the scraper, and answer them in the holly-bush so that he might prick his fingers when he got them."

She ended with another sigh, as she rested her little round chin in her hand, and looked plaintively at the fire.

But Mrs. Abercarne was not to be put off like this.

"Christina," she said solemnly, drawing herself up another inch, and looking at the fire herself, lest her daughter's sighs should mollify her too soon, "I insist upon a full explanation. You have given me none. All I know at present is, that my daughter has so far forgotten what is due to herself as a gentlewoman, as to carry on a clandestine correspondence with some unknown person. I insist upon knowing at once who the person is."

Chris looked at her dolefully.

"Oh, mother, won't it do if I promise not to write again, and not to receive any more letters?"

"No, Christina, it will not do," said Mrs. Abercarne, obstinately. "It is a matter of course that you will cease this correspondence. But, in the meantime, I insist on knowing the name of the person who has induced you to jeopardise your own self-respect."

Whereupon Chris jumped up with a gesture indicating restlessness and despair.

"All right, mother! Now, don't scream; it's Mr. Richard—there!"

If a servant had suddenly appeared with the news that an invading army had landed at the pier-head, and was now surrounding the house, or that Lord Llanfyllin had poisoned Lady Llanfyllin and married his cook, poor Mrs. Abercarne would have been less utterly shocked and struck dumb than she was by this intelligence. For a few moments she could only stare at her daughter, who now, that the crisis was over, began to laugh half hysterically.

"Mr.—Richard," the poor lady at last gasped out. "Mr. Richard—the lu—lu—lunatic? Oh! it isn't possible! It's too awful—too appalling! I—I—I shall die if it's true!"

But Chris was getting better already. She slid down on her knees, and put her arm round her mother's neck, unable now to restrain a wild inclination to laugh at her mother's hopeless terror.

"No, you won't, mother. Of course I couldn't help knowing you'd be awfully angry, and so I put off telling you. But it's not half as bad as you think. Dick's no more mad than you or I."

"Dick!" cried poor Mrs. Abercarne, with a shriek, which subsided into a moan. "To think of my daughter—my Christina, calling a m—m—madman Dick!"

"But when I tell you that he's not mad, not mad at all," insisted Chris, raising her voice a little to emphasise her words.

The words were hardly out of her mouth when she sprang up with a little cry.

Mr. Bradfield was in the room.

Chris became in an instant as red as she had been white before.

"Have you been listening?" she asked, impulsively.

"Sh-sh, Christina," said her mother's reproving voice.

But the intruder answered with great meekness :

"Well, I did hear what you were saying when I came in; and what's more, I'm very glad I did, for you were making a statement which it's my business to disprove. You were saying that somebody was not mad. Now, of course, you mean my unhappy ward, Richard."

"Your unhappy ward!" retorted Chris, with spirited emphasis. "Yes, I do mean him."

"You think he is not mad?"

"Not mad enough to be shut up, at any rate."

He seemed taken aback by the girl's boldness and straightforwardness, and he did not immediately answer, but left Mrs. Abercarne time to read her daughter a little lecture on the impropriety of her present behaviour, which, she said, was only the sequel to be expected to her conduct in deceiving her mother. Chris began to look distressed, but, before she could answer this accusation, Mr. Bradfield broke in :

"Never mind what she says, Mrs. Abercarne. She's only a foolish girl, and it's lucky we've found out this affair before he's found an opportunity of dashing her silly brains out. He's been worse than usual the last few days, and I'm expecting some sort of dangerous outbreak every day. Let us be thankful things have gone no further."

And, affecting to take no further notice of Chris,

he shook hands with Mrs. Abercarne, bade her good-night, and left the room with a curious look of sullen determination on his face, which frightened the younger lady so much that she was silent for some minutes.

At last she said, in a frightened whisper :

"Mother, what do you think he's going to do? I never saw him look like that before."

But she got no sympathy. Mrs. Abercarne was entirely on John Bradfield's side, and expressed her opinion that whatever he did would be the proper thing to do. But, on the promise of Chris to cease all correspondence at once with Mr. Richard, a truce was patched up between mother and daughter, and the subject of contention was allowed to drop.

Poor Chris, however, felt that she could not so suddenly break off all communication with the unhappy Dick without one word of explanation. So she contrived to meet Stelfox that very night before she retired to her room, and without hiding the fact that she had been exchanging communications with his charge, begged him to tell Mr. Richard that she had been obliged to promise to do so no longer.

Stelfox, as usual, showed no surprise. He said he would deliver her message, and that was all.

It is not to be wondered at that, after such an exciting evening, Chris was unable to sleep. She now occupied a little bed in the same room with her mother's large one; and presently, finding her own sad thoughts intolerable, she got up and very quietly crossed the corridor to the Chinese-room in search of a book.

Just as she reached the door, a noise, which seemed to come from the east wing at the opposite end of the

house, caused her to turn her head quickly. There was no light in the corridor, so that she could see nothing. Her first idea was that burglars had got into the house, and she was on the point of running back to rouse her mother, and give the alarm, when she heard the unlocking of a door. It then flashed into her mind that it was, perhaps, Stelfox coming out of the east wing that had attracted her attention. Being determined to find out which of these two surmises was correct, and not wishing to alarm the household without cause, she went to the end of the corridor, without, however, venturing too near the spot whence the noise came. Chris was not particularly courageous, and the fear of meeting a real live burglar, caused her to tremble from head to foot. The noise went on all the time, until she reached the railing which surrounded the well of the staircase, and from here she could see a dark mass, which might have been anything, but which must, she supposed, be a human being, disappearing out of her sight from the bottom of the staircase into the hall. That was all she could see; and as she still leaned over the railing, the last sound died away, without her being able to tell whether the figure she had seen had left the house or not.

For a few moments she was absolutely paralysed with terror, and remained quite still in the cold, not daring to move, or to cry out, afraid even to turn round, lest she should find the hand of a burglar laid upon her mouth. At last, however, as she heard nothing more, she began slowly to recover her wits, and to wonder what it was she had seen, what she should do, and whether she was not making a great fuss about nothing.

Then followed shame at her own alarm, until at last she went back along the corridor, telling herself that the cause of her fright must have been a visit paid by Stelfox to his charge in the east wing. Of course, it might have been a burglar that she had seen, but then, on the other hand, it seemed more likely that it was not, for burglars usually find out, before entering a house, in what part of it the most valuable portable property is kept, and it was certainly not kept in the east wing.

So Chris, reassured, went into the Chinese-room, though not without a feeling that this was an exceedingly daring thing for her to do, after the fright she had had.

She had chosen her book, and was opening the door, when, her ears being more on the alert than usual, she heard another unusual noise, proceeding this time from the outside of the house. Kneeling upon the ottoman under the window at the west end of the corridor, she looked out, and saw to her horror a man staggering along across the grass in the direction of the sea, with a shapeless mass hanging over his shoulder ; and as this shapeless mass defined itself, when her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she saw that it was the body of a man

CHAPTER XXIX.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

IT is sad, in these days of strong-minded girls with nerves of iron, to have to relate of poor Chris Abercarne that she fainted. No sooner had she convinced herself that it was really the body of another man that the living man in the garden below was carrying across his shoulder than her hands relaxed their hold of the window-sill, and she fell in a heap on the ottoman.

When she opened her eyes again she knew nothing but that she felt very cold, so that for the first moment she supposed that she was in bed, and that the bed-clothes had slid off on to the floor. Raising herself, and looking about her, she soon remembered what had happened, and with a cry got on to her feet. So stiff and benumbed was she, that she staggered on her way back to her own and her mother's room, and fumbled with the handle.

While she was thus occupied, another occurrence, almost as startling as the previous one, attracted her attention. There was a flash of light at the other end of the corridor, and by it Chris saw, with perfect distinctness, Mr. Bradfield coming out of the door of the east wing. Before Chris had had time to make out where the light came from, Mr. Bradfield reclosed the door softly, and he and the light disappeared at the same time.

Chris felt as if she was losing her wits. Hastily rousing her mother from sleep, she told her all that had happened in such an hysterical fashion, with such wild eyes, and such a pale face, that at first Mrs. Abercarne was disposed to think that the girl had been dreaming. Chris herself seemed to incline to the same opinion. Nevertheless, she begged her mother just to come into the corridor with her for one moment.

"Perhaps," went on Chris, her teeth chattering with the cold, "perhaps you'll see something or hear something to show you that it was really true. But, oh! how I hope you won't."

Mrs. Abercarne drew on her dressing-gown, and mother and daughter went out into the corridor together. They had scarcely done so before they began to cough and to choke, as a volume of blinding smoke came rushing towards them from the east end of the house.

"Fire! fire! The house is on fire!" cried Mrs. Abercarne.

And as she rushed along the corridor, she ran against Mr. Bradfield as he came out of his room.

"What—what do you say?" cried he, as if in amazement and alarm.

But Chris noticed that he had had time to dress; and as a multitude of ghastly suspicions forced themselves into her mind, she burst out, passionately:

"Dick! What have you done to Dick?"

Mr. Bradfield did not turn to look at her, nor did he answer; but she saw him shiver.

By this time the whole household had taken the alarm. The servants came running from above and from below, among the latter being Stelfox, whom

Chris detained for a moment as soon as he reached the top of the stairs.

“Mr. Richard! Mr. Richard!” she cried, in tones of agony. “Save him, save him—if *he is there!*”

As she uttered these words, prompted thereto by a sudden suspicion that it was Stelfox himself whom she had seen carrying the lifeless body, and that the body was that of the unhappy Dick, she saw a look exchanged between the man-servant and Mr. Bradfield, who had come up to hear what she was saying. Chris put her hands up to her head, covered her eyes and shrank back with a great sob. The horror of the situation, and the fears of her heart, were too much for her. She let her mother lead her to a seat, where she sat shivering and weeping silently during the tumult which followed. But unnerved and disorganised as she was, Chris had sense enough left to notice that Stelfox did not rush forward and attempt to force an entrance into the burning wing. He tried the handle of the door indeed, but finding it locked, he did not even produce his own key. He turned instead towards his master, and looked at him for a moment steadfastly before suggesting that the fire-extinguishers, which were kept ready in cupboards all over the house, should be brought and used at once.

Mr. Bradfield at once gave an order to that effect, and as in the meantime the stablemen had been at work on the outside with ladders and with apparatus which was kept in the stable-yard for the purpose, before very long the fire was got under, and it was possible to enter the rooms of the east wing.

In the meanwhile Mr. Richard had not been forgotten. The outer door leading to his apartments

had been burst open ; but the rush of black, blinding smoke which followed, made it absolutely impossible to penetrate further than the passage within. The stablemen, who tried from outside to rescue the unfortunate man, fared no better. By the time they had forced the windows the rooms were all alight and they found it impossible to enter.

Exclamations of pity and distress on account of the unlucky young fellow passed from lip to lip among the women of the household, whose sobs and cries added to the tumult. The one woman whom a mixed assembly generally produces who is the equal of any man, was duly forthcoming in the person of a young housemaid, who, at the risk of her life, penetrated as far as Mr. Richard's sleeping apartment, which was by that time all in flames. She was rescued herself just in time, being dragged out in an insensible condition. But as soon as she revived, she declared that she had been in time to discover that Mr. Richard was not in the bed at all. This statement, which she made in presence of most of the household, was little regarded except by Chris, on whose ears this piece of intelligence fell with sinister import. She fell back again into her mother's arms, her eyes closed, in a state bordering on insensibility. It having been by this time ascertained that the fire would not spread beyond the wing in which it had originated, Mr. Bradfield had leisure to think of the girl. He drew near to where she sat leaning against her mother's shoulder, and asked if she was better. But at the first sound of his voice, Chris started up, her eyes wide open, her face lined with horror.

"I shall never be better, never," she said, tremulously, "until I am out of this dreadful house."

And she would not look at him, she would not listen to him ; but nestling against her mother like a pert and frightened child, she turned her head away with a shudder.

"Don't speak to her now," said Mrs. Abercarne, anxiously. "I am afraid the poor child is going to be ill."

She led her daughter back to her room, but, even as they went along the corridor, there came to their ears a rumour, a cry which had passed from one to the other of the servants until it reached them.

Mr. Richard could not be found ; this was the burden of the cry. Chris stopped short.

"No," she said, in a low voice, staring in front of her. "He was murdered first, and the place was set on fire as a blind."

And then she laughed hysterically, so that her mother began to tremble for her sanity.

When the morning came, Chris was too ill to get up, and a doctor was sent for, who ordered her to remain in bed, and keep very quiet. Before night she had become worse, and on hearing that she had been suffering from worry and shock, the doctor gave it as his opinion that she was suffering from brain fever. It was either that or typhoid, although at the present stage he could not definitely pronounce which it was.

In the meantime rumour was busy, and it said, starting from the gossip among the servants of the household, that the fire had not been an accident. The place was not insured, so there was no official investigation into its origin. But gossip spoke of the smell of paraffin, and the story was soon current that Mr. Richard had conceived a hopeless passion

for Miss Abercarne, that he had set fire to the place in order to effect his escape, and that he had then committed suicide by throwing himself into the sea.

Chris knew nothing of all this. She lay for many days unconscious, hanging at one time between life and death. Mr. Bradfield's despair at any apparent change for the worse in her condition was quite as great as that of her own mother. His haggard face, his anxious eyes, the change from brusque abruptness to an almost timorous vacillation in his manner, excited the comment of the entire neighbourhood. Some put the change in him down to anxiety as to the fate of his ward, of whom no inquiries could find a trace; some to his despair on the young lady's account. When Chris began to get better, her mother's anxieties about the girl were as deep as ever. For the melancholy in the girl's eyes was touching in the extreme; a shadow seemed to have been cast upon her whole nature. Her frivolity had gone, but it seemed to have taken the freshness of her youth with it. Mrs. Abercarne longed for, at the same time that she dreaded, an explanation.

It came one day when Chris had been carried, for the first time, into the Chinese-room, and laid upon the sofa. Mrs. Abercarne was watching her daughter anxiously, when Chris said:

"Mother, has anything been found out—about the fire?"

Mrs. Abercarne flushed slightly; she had heard a good many rumours, but had shut her ears as much as possible.

"Found out!" she echoed, as if surprised by the question. "Why, no, of course not."

"I mean—doesn't anybody think it strange?"

"That there should be a fire? No. It is always dangerous to use lamps. And Mr. Richard, poor young man, was evidently not to be trusted with one."

Chris moved impatiently. But she only asked:

"Do they think he was burnt alive, then?"

Mrs. Abercarne hesitated. She wished with all her heart, poor dear lady, that she could honestly say "yes." But truth (and the certainty that she would be found out if she told a falsehood) prevailed.

"It is impossible to say," she answered, shortly. "But—but I believe they did not succeed in finding any traces of the body."

"Ah!" said Chris, as if this had been just what she expected.

She asked no more questions, but sat for a long time looking thoughtfully out at the sea. At last her mother ventured to say:

"Mr. Bradfield wants to know, my darling, what flowers you would like best for him to send you. He is very anxious for the time to come when he may see you, though he does not wish to intrude too soon."

Mrs. Abercarne had thought it wiser not to look at her daughter while she said this, so she did not see the cloud which darkened on the girl's face at the mention of the name.

When Chris next spoke, however, there was a difference in her tone.

"Mother, I want to speak to Stelfox."

Mrs. Abercarne flushed again, and frowned slightly with perplexity. She wished her daughter would not

make such awkward requests. After a moment's hesitation she asked :

"Why, my dear? What have you got to say to him? I am quite sure," she went on, hurriedly, "that the doctor would not allow you to see anybody just yet."

Chris turned slowly and looked at her mother.

"Has he been sent away?" she asked abruptly.

"Well, my dear, I don't know whether he has been sent away for good or not, but he is certainly away at present."

The girl's face fell again, and her mother in vain tried to rouse her from the depression into which she had sunk.

The hopelessness which had fallen upon the girl like a pall retarded her convalescence. She took no interest in anything; the only way in which her mother could rouse any emotion in her was by an allusion to Mr. Bradfield; and then the feeling shown by the girl was one of the utmost abhorrence.

Poor Mrs. Abercarne, therefore, soon began to find herself in a very awkward position between her employer on the one hand, eagerly anxious to see the girl, or even to minister to her pleasure, unseen, in any way that might be suggested; and her daughter on the other, who had conceived such a strong aversion for the man that she would not even look at the books and papers her mother brought her, because she knew that they were supplied by him. Her dislike, indeed, to the very sound of his name was becoming almost a mania, so that Mrs. Abercarne feared she would have to leave Wyngnam on account of it.

It need scarcely be said that Mrs. Abercarne, who

had been completely won by John Bradfield's passion for her daughter, not only acquitted him of the crime her daughter chose to suggest in the matter of the fire, but looked upon the disappearance of the lunatic, either by suicide or by misadventure, as a very fortunate circumstance.

CHAPTER XXX.

MR. MARRABLE AGAIN.

THE doctor was troubled by the slowness of the girl's convalescence, and by her own lack of a strong desire to get well again. He recommended change for one thing, and cheerful society. Now the one was as difficult to get as the other. Change could only be got by sacrificing a situation to the disadvantages of which Mrs. Abercarne had grown accustomed, while its advantages she appreciated more every day. Cheerful society seemed more out of the question still.

It was therefore with a feeling almost of gratitude that Mrs. Abercarne, while sitting by her daughter's sofa one morning, heard that Miss Lilith Graham-Shute was downstairs, and that she wanted to know if she could see Miss Abercarne.

"Show her up, Corbett," said Mrs. Abercarne. And turning to Chris, she said: "You would like to see her, my dear, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," said Chris.

The two girls, indeed, had felt a mutual attraction, and had only been prevented by the fierce enmity

which raged between their respective mothers from becoming very good friends indeed.

When Lilith came in, smiling, bright-eyed, cheery, and suffering from a valiant attempt to subdue her usual exuberance of voice and manner, her entrance was like a ray of sunshine. She came to the side of the sofa on tip-toe, which was quite unnecessary, and caused her to be so unsteady of gait that she knocked over a basket of flowers which had been placed on a little stand beside the sofa.

"Oh, look what I've done!" she cried, as she stooped down in haste to repair the mischief.

"Oh, you needn't trouble about those things!" cried Chris, ungratefully, with a little look which girls' freemasonry enabled Lilith to understand.

Miss Graham-Shute's big brown eyes grew round with delight at the prospect of a little bit of interesting gossip, if they should get a chance to be alone together. She nodded discreetly, as she went down on her knees to rearrange the scattered daffodils and lilies of the valley.

"I'm such a clumsy creature!" cried she, in feigned distress. "Donald always says I'm like a bull in a china shop. Oh!" she cried, as she buried her little *retroussé* nose in a bunch of Parma violets, "I should like to be ill if I could get such attentions bestowed upon me! You *are* a lucky girl, Chris! And an ungrateful one too!" she added in a lower voice, with a glance at Mrs. Abercarne, whose back was for the moment turned.

"You can have the flowers, if you like," said Chris quickly. "Yes, do take them," she added, eagerly as Lilith made a gesture of refusal, "I shall be so glad if you will. They—they are too strongly scented,"

she added, as an excuse, as she noticed a look of pain and annoyance on her mother's face.

"Oh, well, they are not too strongly scented for me," said Lilith, drily. "Thank you awfully, dear. I'll be sure to remember to bring back the basket."

"No, don't; keep it, I don't want to see any of it again."

She spoke petulantly, for the handsome gift had been accompanied by a message from Mr. Bradfield, almost demanding permission to see her.

Then Mrs. Abercarne, moved to wrath, spoke:

"I think you are very ungrateful, Chris. Those flowers were sent from Covent Garden expressly for you, and at great expense."

She was not unwilling to annoy the Graham-Shutes, by proving in what high estimation "the Abercarnes" were held at Wyngham House.

"Chris, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, you really ought," said Lilith, gaily, as she got up from her knees. "Now, don't let me knock anything else over. You haven't any silver tables, or anything of that sort, luckily."

She glanced merrily round her, in all innocence; but Mrs. Abercarne, always rather too ready to feel insulted, chose to consider this speech as a barbed one.

"No; unfortunately we are not rich enough to buy unnecessary things," she said acidly; "and we are not refined enough to look upon silver tables as necessities."

"You needn't talk at me as if I were mamma, Mrs. Abercarne," cried Lilith, brightly. "I know we buy unnecessary things, and leave the necessary ones un-

bought. I know we spend money on toys which are supposed to be ancient silver, when in reality they are modern pewter, and have to darn our gloves. I know we do lots of things which are foolish, and get us laughed at, but, after all, you *can* laugh at us, and you ought to be grateful for that!"

The girl's sense of fun was infectious, and Chris laughed aloud. Lilith went on:

"The latest—no, not the very latest craze, but the latest but one, is for me to blossom out into a great dramatic writer, and to buy a house for us all in Kensington Palace Gardens. Mamma says I am brimming over with talent (and perhaps I am, but it hadn't troubled me much till it was pointed out to me), and there is a dearth of dramatists, and I am to 'supply a long-felt want,' as the advertisements say. And all on the strength of my little play the other day, which, by-the-by, I have sent up to a London manager to read. Of course, I'm hoping he'll take it, but it seems almost too good to be possible, doesn't it?"

The girl spoke playfully, but with just enough wistfulness in her tone for the other ladies to see that she was full of the most forlorn of all forlorn hopes. Mrs. Abercarne began to perceive that even Graham-Shutes may be human, moved with like passions to our own. And when Corbett appeared again, asking if she could speak to Mrs. Abercarne for a minute, that lady left the room with the pleasant consciousness that the visit of the lively girl was doing Chris good.

No sooner were they alone, than Lilith drew near to her companion mysteriously.

"Chris, tell me, is it true that you don't like Mr.

Bradfield, and don't mean to marry him if he asks you?"

"Indeed it is," answered Chris hotly, with more energy than she had shown since the beginning of her illness. "I wouldn't marry him if he were the richest and the most charming person in the world!"

"Then I think you're very silly."

Chris laughed a little.

"It's lucky Mrs. Graham-Shute can't hear you say so."

Lilith burst into a laugh of delightful merriment.

"Yes, indeed it is," she admitted heartily. "It's the greatest dread of her life that you should become Mrs. John Bradfield, of Wyngnam House. And nothing will induce her to believe that you are not trying to bring it about. For my own part," she went on, prosaically, as Chris shook her head, "I should think much better of you if you were."

Chris looked at her in amazement.

"What? This from *you*!" cried she. "They do say, you know, that you are always in love, and always with somebody who hasn't any money at all."

"Well, I suppose they're right. Men who have money *are* always horrid, aren't they? Still, if one of the horrid creatures were to ask me, I should have to have him, I suppose," she went on with a sigh. "And as no girl can ever fall in love with a rich man, I may just as well be in love with a poor man first, and know something of the sentiment."

"Who is it now?" asked Chris, smiling, and rather interested.

"Oh, it's still the same one, the mysterious stranger

I saw in the barn on the evening of the *tableaux vivants*."

"What!" said Chris, turning suddenly crimson, while the tears rushed into her eyes. "It is more than two months since then. This is constancy indeed."

"It's so easy to be constant down here," sighed Lilith. "And I admit that I might have wavered a little before now in my devotion if I hadn't seen, or thought I had seen, my handsome stranger in town the other day, when I went up with mamma to do some shopping."

To her astonishment, Chris sprang up from her sofa in great excitement.

"You saw him? You saw him?" cried she, all her old animation in her face, the old ring in her voice.

Lilith looked at her in amazement.

"Why, Chris, who was he? You pretended you didn't know."

But the light had already died out of her companion's eyes. Sighing heavily she answered:

"Indeed it was true that I did not then know whom you meant. And if you did really see him yesterday, why, then he was not the person I have since supposed him to have been."

Lilith, who had heard rumours of the flirtation, or attachment between Chris and the alleged lunatic, was full of interest and curiosity.

"Why, Chris," said she, "was that the person they called Mr. Richard? If so, I don't wonder you liked him better than cousin John."

But Chris would confess nothing, and rather irritated Lilith by her reticence.

"What do people say about him? How do they account for his having disappeared?"

"Well," said Lilith, lowering her voice, "they say that he set the place on fire in order to escape, and that he'll come back some day and murder cousin John!"

"That's all nonsense," said Chris, sharply. "A lunatic might do that, but not Dick."

"Dick, oh!" said Lilith, raising her eyebrows. "You have confessed something at any rate, now, haven't you?"

But for answer Chris burst into tears, so that Mrs. Abercarne, returning, looked at Lilith with stern reproach.

"I'm so sorry," said Lilith, penitently; "but, Mrs. Abercarne, it's really better for her to cry than to lie all day looking as if she wanted to! And oh! I'd nearly forgotten what I came for; mamma sent me to borrow a box of sardines."

Mrs. Abercarne suppressed a smile at this characteristic errand.

"I'm afraid we haven't such a thing in the house," she said. "A friend of Mr. Bradfield's has just arrived from town unexpectedly, so we have been running our eyes over the stores to see what we could give him to eat to stave off his hunger until Mr. Bradfield comes home to luncheon."

"Who is it, mother?" asked Chris, in whom Mrs. Abercarne noted this curiosity as a sign that Lilith's visit had done her good.

"Oh, the unfortunate person who sprained his ankle on Christmas day."

"Mr. Marrable!" Chris clasped her hands with a fresh access of excitement. "Mother, let me see him at once. Do let me."

Both the other ladies were a good deal surprised at

this demand, and the vehemence with which it was expressed. But there was no resisting her importunity; and therefore, as soon as Lilith had reluctantly taken her departure, Mr. Marrable, as shy and nervous as ever, was shown up into the Chinese-room.

He expressed his delight at the honour Miss Abercarne had done him by admitting him, and was proceeding to utter some old-fashioned compliments which he had been preparing on the way upstairs, when Chris, by a look at her mother, induced that lady to leave the room. Then the girl turned to Mr. Marrable, and exhibited a sudden energy which startled that rather flaccid gentleman.

"Mr. Marrable," she said imperiously, "I have heard you talk of an old friend of yours and Mr. Bradfield's, named Gilbert Wryde."

At the mention of the name, Mr. Marrable started violently.

"Yes, yes, er—er—I may have mentioned him; I say I may have mentioned him," he answered feebly, looking round as if he hoped to find a way of escape.

"This Gilbert Wryde had a son, I think you said?"

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured poor Mr. Marrable; and then, seeing that she was determined, he admitted that he might have mentioned that too.

"Tell me, and tell me the truth, mind," continued the young girl, earnestly, "when you knew that son, years ago that was, of course, when he was a child, was there anything the matter with him?"

Mr. Marrable stared at her piteously, as if feel-

ing he could hope for no mercy from this excited female.

"Nothing," murmured he feebly, "nothing of any consequence, that is to say, beyond, of course, being deaf and dumb."

To his horror, the young lady sprang up with a wild cry, clasping her hands as if she had received a revelation.

"Deaf—and—dumb!"

And, uttering these words, she sank back fainting on the sofa.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BLACKMAIL.

POOR Mr. Marrable was very much frightened by the effect of his words upon Chris. He rushed to the door of the room, and summoned Mrs. Abercarne with frantic cries.

But before her mother could reach the room, Chris had entirely recovered her self-command under the influence of a strong feeling of relief, and when Mr. Marrable went downstairs to await John Bradfield's return, she was brighter and less listless than she had been since her illness.

In the first place, the hope, weak as it was, which Lilith's words had woke in her, was enough to live upon for a day or two at least; and in the second place, the fact she had learnt from Alfred Marrable had relieved her from the last trace of suspicion that she had given her love to a maniac. Now that she knew that Mr. Richard had been deaf and dumb, she

understood much that had appeared strange in his conduct towards her. It was clear that when he had left her questions unanswered, it was because he could not hear them; and she now remembered that he had watched her lips as often as possible when she spoke, and had evidently understood her words by these means. This, then, was the infirmity to which he had alluded in his letter; and now the only thing which puzzled her was the fact that on the last two occasions when she had met him he had spoken to her. When and how had he recovered or obtained the power of speech?

It is a curious fact that this interview with Mr. Marrable, and the information he had given her, increased, without her being able to account for it, her new belief that her lover might be still alive. She moved about with new cheerfulness, nourishing the hope that her mother would either take her, or send her to London, where, as she knew, all those people go who for any reason wish to remain for a time in concealment.

On the other hand, what reason could Dick have for wishing to remain in hiding? Would he not rather, if he had escaped the dangers of the night of the fire, return either to see her, or to bring Mr. Bradfield to book for his long incarceration? And what had been the object of that incarceration? What, also, had been the meaning of the scene she witnessed on the night of the fire?

With these and similar questions the young girl's brain seemed to reel as she sat at her window looking out at the grey sea.

Meanwhile Mr. Bradfield had returned from his morning's ride, and had been greeted, on dismounting

from his horse, with the information that Mr. Marrable was waiting to see him.

John Bradfield entered the dining-room, into which the discriminating footman had shown the visitor as a person not quite smart enough for the drawing-room, with a frown on his face.

"Oh, so you're here again, are you?" was his abrupt greeting.

Alfred, who felt better after the glass of beer and crust of bread and cheese which he had modestly chosen as his refreshment, came towards his old friend smiling, and trying to look cheerful.

"Yes," he answered mildly, "as you say, I'm here again."

His cheerfulness did not please Mr. Bradfield, who frowned still more as he asked shortly:

"Well, and what do you want?"

Now this Mr. Marrable did not quite like to confess. So he went on smiling, until he perceived by an ominous motion of his friend's boot, that that gentleman's endurance was about to give way.

"Well, John, it's no use beating about the bush. The fact is, I'm down on my luck; there's nothing doing up in town, and things don't seem to get any better, and——"

"And you want some money, I suppose; your next quarter's allowance advanced you, in fact?"

"Well, no; not exactly that, though I don't say it wouldn't be a convenience."

John looked at him incredulously.

"What do you want, then?"

He wasn't exactly afraid of Marrable, who seemed too flabby a sort of person to inspire one with much fear of what he might do; at the same

time there was no denying that the weak vessel before him contained some perilous stuff in the way of undesirable knowledge. The man's audacity in coming down again so soon gave him food for reflection.

"The fact is," answered Marrable, softly, "that my wife and I were talking things over last night, and she said things were so bad that it would be better for us to part, and she said she was sure you wouldn't mind giving an old friend like me a shelter for a time."

"The d——l she did!" exclaimed Mr. Bradfield, in amazement. "And hadn't you the sense to tell her that the suggestion was like her cheek?"

"Why, no, John," returned Marrable, just as gently as ever. "I didn't tell her that, for I thought myself it wasn't a bad idea."

There was a pause, during which John Bradfield, considered the downcast, hang-dog face of the other, while his own grew perceptibly paler.

"Why?" he presently asked.

"Oh, I'm sure I don't want to make myself unpleasant in any way, John, but it seemed so odd to find Gilbert Wryde's son here, shut up as a lunatic——"

John Bradfield shivered. And the look he cast at the other was not pleasant to see.

"Do you mean to suggest that you had any reason for thinking that he was not a lunatic?"

Marrable's answer came quickly. He was evidently anxious to get it out before he got afraid to say it:

"Well, I should like to see him, that's all."

"You haven't heard, then, about the fire down

here? He overturned his lamp, set fire to the place, and was burnt alive."

"Dear me! Was there an inquest?"

These direct questions, put timorously, had the effect of making John Bradfield so furious that he stammered as he spoke:

"There was no inquest. The body could not be found!"

"Perhaps," suggested Marrable, "he wasn't burnt at all. Perhaps he escaped, or perhaps——"

Although he paused, significantly, John Bradfield did not urge him to go on. There was a silence before Alfred said, in the same infantile manner as before:

"And what became of all his money, John?"

"He never had any."

"But he ought to have had plenty," rejoined Marrable, in the same sing-song voice. "Now, I'll make a clean breast of it, John. Not that I wish to make myself unpleasant, as I said before, but when I was down here at Christmas I thought things looked fishy (I don't want to be unkind, but they really did); so when I got back to town I got a friend to cable over to Melbourne for me, and find out the particulars of Gilbert Wryde's will."

Then there was a pause. John Bradfield looked, not at his old chum, but out at the sea, which lay a bright blue grey in the sunshine. To think that he should have escaped detection all these years, to be brought to book at last by such a paltry creature—that was the thought that was surging in his mind as he stood digging his nails into his own flesh and not listening very eagerly for the next words, for he knew so well what they would be.

"I only got the letter yesterday which gave me all particulars. I know that Gilbert Wryde left all his money to you in trust for his son. So," pursued Alfred, slowly, and apparently without vindictiveness, "you never really made any money at all yourself, John, any more than I? But you've lived like a fighting-cock on Gilbert Wryde's. That's about the size of it, isn't it, old chap?"

Although he was trying to give a playful turn to his conversation, Marrable did not speak cheerfully.

There was a long pause. John Bradfield, being hopelessly cornered, saw that there was nothing for it but to find out the lowest price at which Alfred would be bought. His methods were always blunt, so that Marrable was not surprised when his old chum simply planted himself on the carpet in front of him, jingling some money in his pockets, and asked briefly :

"How much do you want?"

Marrable, who never looked up at his friend if he could help it, bleated out, quite plaintively :

"Well, John, for myself, I should be sorry to stoop so low as to take anything ; but I should like to send home a ten-pound note, if you could spare it, and all I ask of you is to put me up here for a bit, and let me make myself at home as we used to do in the old days together."

John Bradfield was so much amazed at this request, that for a few moments he could give no answer whatever. The thought of having always in the house with him this flabby, weak-kneed creature, who was, nevertheless, his master, by virtue of his knowledge, was so galling, that he would rather have given up the half of his ill-gotten property than have supported

the infliction. He laughed shortly, therefore, and said, in a jeering tone :

"What, believing me to be capable of what you accuse me of, you are willing to trust yourself under the same roof with me? It wouldn't be very hard to make *you* pass for a lunatic with all the medical men in the county, you know !"

But Marrable bore the jibe placidly.

"If anything were to happen to me, John, while I was down here," he answered, composedly, "my wife, who put me up to coming down, would come down after me ; and if once *she* got hold of you, John, oh ! wouldn't you wish me back again, that's all !"

John Bradfield was silent. The net was closing round him. Already the fatal knowledge was in the power of more persons than he knew ; he felt the strong walls of his citadel, in which he had been secure for seventeen years, crumbling. He was man enough, however, to be able to keep his feelings to himself.

"All right," said he, shortly, "you can stay if you like, of course. And when you like to go, you can take what you want with you."

But Marrable, who had a conscience, was not quite satisfied.

"Thank you, John," he answered, rather dismally. "I thought you wouldn't mind giving a shelter to an old chum down on his luck. But, mind you," he went on, shaking a slow, fat forefinger impressively as he spoke, "I don't mind taking a crust from you as a friend, seeing that, after all, it's not your money at all, but Gilbert Wryde's, and that he'd have helped me like a prince without my asking. But you understand that I wouldn't be so mean as to

take a bribe to hold my tongue if Gilbert's son were still alive."

Blunt as John Bradfield habitually was, his bluntness was as nothing to the terribly tactless and blundering plain-speaking of Alfred, who thought he was conducting the interview with equal amiability and cleverness, while, in reality, every speech he uttered made John Bradfield wince, and filled him with an ever-growing wish that he dared kick his meek master.

And so Alfred Marrable became a permanent guest at Wyngnam House.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A RESURRECTION.

ENCOURAGED by her condescension on his first arrival, Alfred Marrable looked forward to finding daily pleasure in the society of the beautiful Miss Abercarne. Great was his disappointment then to find that she took advantage of her position as a convalescent to remain entirely in her own rooms; so that, at the end of his first fortnight at Wyngnam, he had seen no more of her than on his first day there.

At the end of that time Chris, having obtained her mother's leave to go away for a change, left for town one day by the morning express, to spend a few weeks with some friends of her mother's in town.

Her sole objects were, in the first place, to avoid for a little longer the inevitable meeting with Mr. Bradfield, and in the next to indulge a wild hope that she had formed of finding that Dick was still alive.

Her first object was gained, of course ; her second remained a vision for the first two months of her stay in London.

Then a very strange incident recalled with great vividness all the associations which linked Wyngham House and Dick together in her memory.

She was looking in the window of a picture dealer in one of the side streets of the West end when a little water-colour drawing attracted her attention.

It was a picture of the sea seen through the branches of trees with one little white sail in the distance. The blood rushed to her cheeks, and her heart began to beat violently ; it was, she thought, just such a view of the sea as could be got from the windows of the east wing at Wyngham House, between the bushy boughs of the American oaks and the ragged trunks of the fir trees. So much attracted was she that on the following day she came by herself to look at the sketch ; and on the third day, being again by herself, she entered the shop and asked the name of the artist and the price of the picture. The price was a modest half-guinea, which Chris, resolved to do without a new summer hat, promptly paid. As for the artist's name, there was a difficulty. The man in the shop did not know it. All he could tell was that the picture was the work of a young man who often brought them sketches, some of which they bought, some of which they rejected. He would probably turn up again in the course of a day or two, with some more work ; and if the young lady wished to see any more of his drawings, they would no doubt have some to show her shortly.

Chris, full of vague imaginings, called again at the

end of a week. They showed her some more sketches which they said were the work of the same artist, and again she was struck with a certain sentiment in the pictures which seemed to her fanciful young mind to express her own feelings about the objects they represented. But the subjects, chiefly of sea and sky, did not arouse in her the same feeling of recognition as the first one had done.

"Perhaps you don't care so much about the sea-pieces without a peep of landscape," suggested the dealer, noticing a slight look of disappointment on his customer's face. "But we shall have some more attractive ones in a day or two, I dare say. The young fellow has gone down to the country, and I've given him a commission."

"What part of the country?" asked Chris, feeling that she was blushing.

"A place called Wyngham, on the south coast, not far from Dover."

Chris felt giddy with a shock which was not all a surprise. She hardly knew how she got out of the shop, nor how she reached the house of her friends. But she told them that she must go back to her mother the very next day; and the two ladies with whom she was staying, not without a little mischievous laughter at the girl's expense, and some malicious suggestions which showed them to be not without penetration, let her go.

As the train bore her back to Wyngham, Chris seemed to be in a dream. The hope which had so long lain dormant in her heart had now sprung up into vivid life. She knew that her lover was alive.

Much to her disgust, it was Mr. Bradfield who met

her at the station. However, circumstances had now cleared him from the worst of the charges of which she had secretly accused him; if Dick was alive, as she believed, it was certain that John Bradfield had not murdered him. So John, who was as gruff as ever, but rather shy, got a more civil greeting than he had ventured to hope.

"I've got the phaeton outside," said he. "Your mother was afraid of the dog-cart; she said you would be. But she was wrong, I know. You don't look like an invalid; you've come back cured."

"Yes," she answered, drawing a quick breath. "I—I am quite well now, thank you."

"Any more disposed to be kind than you were, eh?"

"That depends," answered Chris, whose emotion was by this time too strong for her to conceal.

John Bradfield looked at her with curiosity.

"Depends on what?"

But Chris waited a moment, and then she gave no direct answer.

"Tell me," said she, in a voice which trembled with eagerness, "have you had any visitors to-day?"

John Bradfield's face grew suddenly livid.

"What visitors?" asked he, harshly, after a pause.

"Ah! Then you have not—yet."

"Why," cried he, in harsher tones than before, "what do you mean? Have you seen anybody?"

He did not pretend not to know whom she meant. Chris looked up into his face with eyes full of eloquent appeal.

"Mr. Bradfield, you know whom I mean. If you have not seen him yet, you will see him soon, I am sure of it."

"You have got up a little scene between you?" asked he in the same disagreeable tones.

"I haven't even seen him. But I know that he is coming. Mr. Bradfield, many things have happened which I don't understand. I don't know how it was that you could ever think him insane. Didn't you know that he was deaf and dumb?"

John Bradfield affected to start violently. He had had his cue.

"Deaf and dumb!" he exclaimed. "Are you sure? Surely Stelfox would have found it out. Unless, indeed, the cunning old rascal deceived me for fear of losing his place."

And he affected to fall into a paroxysm of rage against the cunning man-servant.

"You do believe, do you not," he went on, earnestly "that I would have cut off my hand rather than commit such a shocking injustice as I seem to have done in all good faith?"

Chris was at first puzzled, and at last deceived by his vehemence. For the last argument he put forward was unanswerable.

"What," said he, "had I to gain by it? He was the son of one of my oldest friends, and I should have liked nothing better than to treat him as my own. Now I understand the hatred the poor lad seemed to have for me. Of course I always took it for one of the signs of insanity in him."

Insensibly Chris had allowed herself to be softened towards her companion, who had indeed succeeded in proving to her that she had most cruelly misjudged him.

He would have liked to prolong the drive, in order to enjoy as long as possible the sight of her pretty

face, growing prettier under the influence of the gentle feeling of self-reproach for her treatment of him ; but there was work too important to be done at home for him to dally with the precious moments.

On reaching Wyngnam House, while Chris ran upstairs to her mother, Mr. Bradfield first informed himself of the whereabouts of the incubus, Marrable. On being informed that that gentleman had retired to his room to rest, as he generally did in the afternoon to digest a very heavy luncheon in slumber, the master of the house went upstairs, peeped in to see that his friend was really asleep, and then noiselessly locked him in, and went downstairs again. He knew that, if Gilbert Wryde's son were really about, the young man would lose no time in making himself known to him. Then he went to his study, from the window of which, as it was in front of the house, he could keep watch.

As he had expected, it was not long before the swinging of the iron gates at the entrance of the drive informed him of the approach of the visitor. John took out the key of the cellarette he kept in his study, and helped himself to a wineglass of brandy.

"And now to bluff it!" said he to himself.

In a few minutes a servant knocked at the door.

"Come in!" cried his master.

The man's face was white, and his manner full of alarm.

"There's a gentleman who wishes to see you, sir. I showed him into the drawing-room. I think, sir, it's—it's Mr. Richard," he ended, in a lower voice, as if announcing a visitor from the other world.

To his astonishment, his master sprang up with an

appearance of the greatest eagerness ; and echoing the name as if it filled him with joy, he hastened through the hall to the drawing-room, and entered with outstretched hands.

Before the west window, in the full stream of light from the declining sun, stood the man who for seventeen years had been the victim of his cruelty and greed. It is not in human nature, even in the spring-time of youth, to recover in a few months from the effects of the confinement of years. Gilbert Wryde's son showed in his prematurely grey hair, in the sharpened outlines of his face, in a certain indefinable look of weariness and waiting in his grey eyes, as well as in the deep lines about his mouth, the effects of his cruel imprisonment.

He turned immediately when the door opened, and confronted John Bradfield with such a look that the latter instantly changed his intention of seizing his visitor by both hands. John felt indefinitely that it would be like shaking hands with a marble statue, and he did not want any more chilling. He was sufficiently master of himself, however, to affect a boisterous delight at the meeting.

"Come here, come here ; sit down," said he. "Let us understand—let us know each other. I have heard to-day such things about you that if you had not come of your own accord, I would have hunted over the world until I had found you."

But the visitor remained standing.

"I should hardly have thought," answered the young man, coldly, "that you would have been in such a hurry."

Mr. Bradfield thought it better for the moment to ignore this speech

"But what is this?" exclaimed he, with apparent solicitude. "You have recovered your speech, your hearing! It is miraculous!"

"Not quite," answered the visitor, in the same tone as before. "I hear, as I speak, with difficulty. But I am under treatment which, they tell me, would have cured me altogether, if it had been applied earlier. I was not dumb from my birth, as you, no doubt, know."

"Richard," said Mr. Bradfield, earnestly, "don't take this tone with me. You would not, if you knew what I have suffered since it was first suggested to me, a few weeks ago, that you were not really insane, as I supposed."

"But what reason," asked the young man, his voice betraying excitement for the first time, "had you for thinking any such thing? Why, if you had got such an idea into your head, did you not consult some specialist on mental cases? Isn't a man's whole life, his whole happiness, worth a guinea fee?"

Now Mr. Bradfield, luckily for himself, had had time to prepare himself for these questions. He knew exactly what line to take in answering them.

"Of course," said he, "you can't really believe what you suggest, that it was meanness which prevented my doing so. When you hear all my reasons for thinking as I did, you will agree with me that I had some ground to go upon. In the meantime, it is more to the point to tell you what I have been doing since Miss Abercarne (for it was she) expressed to me her belief you were sane."

The mention of the girl's name had, of course, the desired effect of making the young man listen. It seemed to argue good faith on Mr. Bradfield's part.

John went on :

"I caused inquiries to be set on foot, right and left, for you. I decided what I should do if I were lucky enough to find you."

The young man interrupted him :

"In the first place, you will tell me something about myself."

"That," answered John, readily, "was what I was going to do. In the first place, you are the son of an old friend of mine, who died in Melbourne in poor circumstances, but who left relations there whom you ought to find out, for I have reason to believe, from something I have since heard, that you might establish your claim to some property held in trust for you over there. Of course, under the impression that you would never be able to use it, I have not troubled about it. I am a rich man, and I was able to do all I could for the son of my old friend."

"Gilbert Wryde!" assented the young man. Seeing the look of surprise on John Bradfield's face, he added, "I learnt that from Miss Abercarne."

"Well," pursued Mr. Bradfield, "there's only one thing for you to do now; you must make your way to Melbourne—I will supply the funds—and prosecute your inquiries there. In the meantime, I will draw up a will, which you shall see, making you all the reparation in my power."

"Thank you," said the young man, still coldly. "I want justice, not benevolence. I can earn enough for myself."

"But you might marry," suggested John.

A softer look came over the young man's face. After a pause of some minutes' duration, he said :

"I will consider what you have said, Mr. Bradfield.

In the meantime, I will not intrude upon you any longer. But I should like, before I go, to see Miss Abercarne for a few minutes if," he added in a gentle tone, "she will see me."

"Unluckily," said John, "she's still in London, where she has been staying with some friends of her mother's for the last three months. But if you'll give me your address, I will get Mrs. Abercarne's permission to send you her daughter's."

The young man moved at once towards the door.

"Thank you," said he. "I will send you my address then. And I will let you hear from me again."

"You won't stay—to dinner?" asked Mr. Bradfield, feeling tolerably secure of his answer.

"No, thank you. There is a train back to town in about an hour. Good afternoon."

And he left the room without another word.

Mr. Bradfield followed him out, and saw him go through the iron gate at the end of the drive, then he went back into the study, and passed his hand with a gesture of relief across his forehead.

"Saved!" muttered he. "Safe for a few hours. What must be the next move?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A LOVE SCENE.

ALTHOUGH Mr. Bradfield kept close watch from the study window, and saw Gilbert Wryde's son safely out of the grounds, he was no more a match than other astute middle-aged persons have been for the wiles of a pair of lovers.

Richard Wryde, although he had let himself be "talked over" by Mr. Bradfield, was not quite so simple as his guardian supposed. Before he was out of the house, therefore, it had occurred to him to doubt whether Mr. Bradfield's information about Chris were correct. It was, at any rate, worth while, he thought, to make the tour of the eastern end of the grounds, on the outer side of the wall, and then to saunter past the sea-front of the mansion, keeping a careful eye on the windows.

And when he was within sight of the window of the Chinese room, he was rewarded for his perspicacity by the sight of Chris, engaged in her favourite occupation of looking out at the sea.

She saw him in a moment, without his having to exert himself to attract her attention. He saw her spring up, clasping her hands. And he knew that all he had to do was to wait for her to come to him.

He went back, therefore, towards the east end of the house, so that the trees might hide him from the curious eyes within. In a few minutes Mr. Bradfield

heard the creaking of the gate again. He got up and looked out ; but Chris had gone through like an arrow, and he saw no one.

When she was once outside the gates, however, shyness, excitement, one does not know what, stayed her flying feet, and brought a flutter to her heart. And when she caught sight of Dick, as he came round the angle of the wall to meet her, she stopped altogether.

Dick was timid too. It seemed to him, as it seemed to her, that the happiness at their lips was too great, that the cup must be dashed away before the draught was taken. The man, of course, recovered first from the stupor of joy following weeks of longing.

Chris, with her eyes upon the ground, felt a hand on her shoulder, warm breath upon her face.

“ You are glad to see me ? Then tell me so.”

She looked up suddenly, saw, in place of the wistful face she remembered, eyes full of the fire of recovered light, of youth renewed. Her lover was no longer the deaf and dumb recluse ; he was as other men are, but with a charm of gentleness, of sadness past, but remembered, which made him infinitely more attractive in her eyes than any other man could ever be.

“ I am so glad,” she whispered, “ that I hardly dare to speak for fear I should cry !”

And, with a sob she tried hard to suppress, she brought out from under her cloak, and held out towards him, the little sketch of the sea seen between the trees of Wyngham House.

“ When I saw this,” she said, brokenly, “ I knew, oh, I knew that you were alive. But you might have

let me know before. For I have been so miserable, I wanted to die."

Her lover took her in his arms; they were under the trees on one side, and in the shelter of the high wall of Wyngnam House on the other; and in words a little old-fashioned, a little more fanciful than the modern lover of every day dares to use, he told her of the light which the sight of her from his prison windows had brought into his life, of the new energy she had unconsciously put into him, of the longing he had felt to stand beside her and to feel the touch of her hand.

"Before you came here," he said, pouring his words into her willing ears with an impetuosity which, in truth, made him well-nigh unintelligible, "Stelfox did not dare to let me out of the rooms in which I was kept, even for ten minutes. He had tried it once, not long ago, and he had only with great difficulty prevented me from attacking that old rascal Bradfield. But when you came, I became at once a different man. I thought no more of Bradfield, or of anybody but you, always you. I lost the dead, sullen patience that my confinement had taught me; I raged like a wild beast shut up for the first time. When I saw Bradfield touch you, as he did that day under my windows, on purpose, I believe, to provoke me, I lost my self-command, and threw at him the first thing that came to my hand. You remember, I dare say. I smashed the window, and nearly frightened you out of your senses. Then Stelfox gave me a lecture which made me ill, really ill, with misery and want of sleep, for two or three days and nights.

"He told me that I had frightened you so much

that you would never come near my windows again ; that you thought my savage attack was upon yourself, and that, in all probability, you would not dare to stay at Wyngham afterwards. So that at last I became so wretched that he had to be merciful, and to tell me that you were not going to leave Wyngham, and that he would contrive for me to see you again. In the meantime, however, I overheard something said by the men working in the garden, which told me that Bradfield himself was in love with you. This, indeed, I had already guessed ; but to hear it confirmed made me so furious that I contrived to pick the lock of my outer door and to get out, with the fixed intention of braining the brute, or, at least, of doing him some severe injury, if I got the chance. I saw him go out, on foot, across the meadows for a walk. I lost sight of him behind the shrubbery, so I thought I would hide among the farm-buildings until he came back. I found the barn door unlocked, so I hid myself there ; and presently you came in, as you know. I can't tell you how I felt. At first it made me giddy to be near you ; it seemed as if my brain would burst, as if I must cry aloud or shout for the very joy of looking into your eyes. When your hand touched mine—it was when you put out your hand to take the lantern, I think—I felt a joy so keen, that it was almost like the pain of a stab. When I put my hand over your mouth so that you should not scream, it was almost more than I could do not to kiss you, as I do now."

He pressed his lips again and again to hers with a passionate vehemence which almost frightened Chris, accustomed as she was to the utmost gentleness on his part. She tried to draw herself out of his arms,

but with a sudden change from passion to wistful tenderness, he partly released her, and drew her hands against his breast with a melancholy smile.

"I am a savage!" he exclaimed. "I have frightened you. Let me at least hold your hands; I will not hurt them. I will hold them like this!"

He relaxed the grasp in which he had held her fingers, and she let her hands lie lightly in his as he went on:

"You must civilise me. And don't be afraid. The block is very rough, but your skill is very great."

As he bent his head to kiss her hands very gently, Chris felt that he was trembling.

"I want to ask you something," said Chris timidly. "Those cries, those strange cries you gave—that evening in the barn! And your strange silence, too! I don't understand. Why didn't you speak to me!"

"I was stone deaf, you know; I had been so ever since I was a small child, when I had scarlet fever badly. It left me absolutely without hearing, so that I could not hear the sound of my own voice."

"Yes, yes, but you could speak?"

"I had learnt to talk when I was a child, but under the treatment of the brute who calls himself my guardian, I had forgotten how. I had got into the way of making cries and noises like a person deaf and dumb from birth."

"But you could speak, for you spoke to me on Christmas Day?"

"Yes; but that is a long story. It was Stelfox who found out, four or five years ago, that I was neither dumb nor insane, and with great patience he

taught me what I had almost forgotten, how to speak again. But I did not dare to speak to you, because, as I told you, I could not hear myself; I had only spoken to Stelfox for years; I distrusted my own powers. When I made the strange cries which frightened you, I was not conscious of it myself. You see, it is true that I am a savage."

Chris, seeing that the avowals he had been making caused him pain and bitter mortification, took his hands, and raising them to her face, laid them tenderly against her cheek.

"That is a trouble you will have no more," she said, softly. "And you can hear now, can you not?"

"I can hear fairly well on one side now," he answered. "I can hear some days better than others. I am under treatment by one of the great London aurists. He says that if I had been brought to him sooner he could have cured me completely; as it is, the hearing in the right ear is completely gone, and in the left it is permanently impaired."

Chris began to sob, and Dick had to comfort her.

"Don't, don't cry, my darling; I shall make you as melancholy as myself if I don't take care—you, who used to be all life and brightness."

"I haven't been very lively since you went away," answered Chris. "I have been very ill. I thought you were de—ead!" And she shuddered. "I thought I saw you carried out—dead—over the grass—hanging over a man's shoulder!"

"I was carried over a man's shoulder, I believe, only I wasn't dead," answered Dick simply. "It was Stelfox's doing."

Chris looked puzzled.

"It was in the evening of the day that they found

out I had been writing to you," said she. "Had that anything to do with it?"

Dick listened with interest.

"Everything, I should think," he answered drily. "Stelfox's account is, that he found me lying on the sofa insensible, when he came in to clear away the dessert on that evening. He examined the decanters on the table, and finding that I had drunk very little wine, came to the conclusion that what little I had taken had been tampered with. He succeeded in rousing me, but left me for the night in such a drowsy condition that he came back again after I was in bed, to find out if I was all right. His suspicions were then aroused by finding that someone had been in the room, so he woke me with difficulty, told me to dress, and made me go downstairs."

"Ah!" interrupted Chris quickly, "that was what I heard, what I almost saw. Well, what then?"

Dick went on :

"By the time we got downstairs I had grown so drowsy that when he left me for a minute I tumbled off to sleep again. He had no idea, he said, at that time of going further with me than the garden, where he thought the fresh air would revive me, while he went upstairs again to make investigations. But my continued drowsiness alarmed him so much that he thought it best to take me first at once into the open air. When we had got outside, however, he found that I was again in a state of stupor, so he lifted me up and carried me bodily across the garden towards the beach, where he thought that he could revive me effectually by splashing the sea-water in my face. In the meantime he saw smoke and flames coming from the east wing, and at once made up his mind that I

could not go back. He left me, therefore, having brought me to myself, while he borrowed a horse and cart from a man he knew ; driving slowly, and resting frequently, so as to spin out the time, we went towards Ashford, where we arrived in plenty of time for him to put me into the first morning train for London. He telegraphed to a brother of his to meet me, and he returned himself to Wyngbam in time to escape awkward questions ; for in the commotion caused by the fire he had not been missed."

"I don't understand Stelfox," said Chris, doubtfully. "I have never been able to make out whether he was a good man who was sorry for you, and was kind to you, or a bad one who found it to his interest to serve Mr. Bradfield in his wicked treatment of you."

"You'd better ask him," said Dick, smiling. "But he says he doesn't know himself. Anyhow, he's been a good friend to me. There is no piece of good fortune, from my recovery of speech down to my escape, that I do not owe to him. So when he tells me not to look too closely into his motives, I take care to humour him."

"But I should like to understand," persisted Chris. "He could have let you out long ago if he had liked then ?"

"He says it would not have paid either him nor me. He wanted me to remain here until he had succeeded in finding out who I was, and what that rascal Bradfield's motive was in keeping me shut up. But he hasn't been able to find out yet, and beyond the fact that I now know my surname, a piece of information which I owe to you, I am as much in the dark as I was when he first shut me up."

Chris mused for a few minutes without speaking. Then she said, half to herself :

"I wonder whether Mr. Marrable could help us?" Then in a different tone, "Won't you see Mr. Bradfield? Won't you ask him for an explanation? He has been kind to mamma and me. I don't want to think he is so wicked as to have known that you were sane! And yet——"

She thought of the drugged wine, of the fire, and she shuddered.

Dick interrupted her.

"I have seen him," he said, shortly. "I have asked for an explanation. But he will give none, at least none to satisfy me."

"And you are going to rest satisfied *not* to be satisfied?" cried Chris, almost with indignation.

"I don't know what I shall do. At present I am going back to town. I had some work to do here." He touched the little sketch which she still held in her hand. "My pastime in the days of captivity has become something more than a pastime now. I had undertaken to make a series of sketches of the sea and shore down here for a dealer——"

"Yes, yes, I know. I found that out," said Chris, blushing at his look of tender surprise.

He kissed her again as he went on :

"But I have found that I must see my cunning old Stelfox first, and tell him what Bradfield has said. Knowing the man better than I do, he may understand better than I Bradfield's motive for behaving generously."

"Behaving generously?" echoed Chris, interrogatively.

"Yes, he will pay my passage out to Melbourne to

make enquiries about some property which he believes has been left to me."

"Then don't go," cried Chris, impulsively. "You have had no reason for trusting him before; why should you trust him now?"

Dick hesitated.

"It does seem rather a slender chance of fortune, doesn't it?" he said at last. "But it's the only one I have. Remember, I not only have to live, but I want to keep a wife too." She bent her head, but he heard a little sigh which had no sorrow in it. "Now I can just keep myself by my sketches; I can do nothing else, and I shouldn't like to see you in anything but pretty frocks."

"I believe," said Chris, solemnly, jumping to a conclusion, "that Mr. Bradfield has got some money belonging to you, for they say that your father was a rich man."

Dick looked thoughtful, but not hopeful. Little opportunity as he had had of knowing the world, he guessed that it would require superhuman energy to set the law in motion to make a rich man disgorge for the benefit of a poor one. For he was too ignorant to know that he could attack Capital in the person of Mr. Bradfield, by invoking the great god Labour. It did not occur to him, therefore, that a smart solicitor could have made a fortune both for himself and his client by bringing an action against John Bradfield, the rich man who had oppressed the poor one.

"I couldn't prove it, even if it were true. And I know nothing of the kind," said he.

Then Chris had another inspiration.

"You ought to consult a lawyer," said she promptly.

The suggestion was so obviously a good one, that Dick agreed to this. And then their talk began to drift from the realms of fact to the pleasanter paths of feeling and fancy, and was carried on chiefly in whispers, and in sentences which had no beginnings and no endings.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MASTER OF THE SITUATION.

WHILE John Bradfield still sat in his study, turning over the papers from a locked drawer in his desk, tearing up some, and carefully putting aside others, he heard again the creaking of the gate, and looking out, saw, in the dusk which had now fallen, a figure which seemed familiar to him. It disappeared at once by the lodge, and Mr. Bradfield, after waiting a few minutes in vain watching for its return, rang the bell, and asked whether anyone had come in by the back way during the past few minutes. The servant said he thought not, but he would inquire; and he returned a few moments later to say that no one had come in.

Mr. Bradfield did not feel satisfied, although he gave no sign of his dissatisfaction.

"I could have sworn it was Stelfox!" said he to himself, as he again looked out of the window.

This time he saw another figure, whom there was no mistaking. The blood mounted to his head as he saw that it was Chris Abercarne, who was walking quickly back into the house. He was hard pressed for time, working among the papers with something

of the feeling of a fox that burrows in the ground when the hounds are within hearing, but he felt that he must spare a moment to speak to her.

Chris was startled by the change which had come upon him since he drove her from the station. She knew of his interview with Dick, and, seen by the light of that knowledge, his face betrayed more than he could guess. The frown on it was not one of anger; it was the harassed, worried frown of a hunted man. And her indignation against him changed in a moment to pity; her face softened

"You have been talking to—Richard, I suppose?" said he shortly, almost rudely, pronouncing the name with an effort.

"Yes," answered Chris gently.

"You're in love with him, or fancy you are, of course?" pursued he harshly.

Chris admitted that too.

"And you think I've ill-treated him, no doubt?"

The young girl's face changed suddenly. She looked so sad, so wistful, that he was touched.

"I—I hope not; oh, I hope not!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you have been so kind to my mother and me, that—that——"

"Well, that what?" said he, not looking at her, and trying to speak as gruffly as ever.

"That I shouldn't like to think——"

She paused again, and there was silence on both sides for a minute or two. Chris was looking with wide eyes at the back of his head, wondering with all her might whether it were possible for a man, a real man, one, too, by no means without the milk of human kindness as far as most people were con-

cerned, to be guilty of the crimes which seemed to have been brought home to him.

John Bradfield, for his part, had been flung, all in a moment, into a sentimental mood. He had truly loved this girl, in his own way, which was not, perhaps, the highest way, but still in a manner not to be altogether despised, except by a woman who was entirely absorbed in love for somebody else. Now he had got to lose her altogether; to lose even that faint hope of holding her some day in his arms, which he had nursed side by side with some particularly cruel and selfish designs upon her favoured lover. For a moment he felt as if he must break down in some sort of confession, perhaps some sort of appeal. Then the sterner stuff in him hardened, and saying only, "Go along with you," he made way for her to pass him on her way upstairs.

Then with one look after her, one sigh, he dismissed her absolutely from his mind, and gave himself up to the serious dangers of the moment, and the way to escape them. For he did not deceive himself; he knew that the cordon was closing round him, that before long the outposts would close in, and the chain of evidence, each link of which was now in the possession of a different person, would be complete against him. It only wanted the garrulous and untrustworthy Marrable to be questioned by either Stelfox, or Richard, or even Chris, for it to become known that the fortune that he, Bradfield, had been enjoying, was that left by Gilbert Wryde to him in trust for Richard, Gilbert's son.

If this had been all the story, John Bradfield might have got off lightly. But the comparing of notes would lead not only to the discovery of the fraud he

had practised, but of the infamous means by which he had maintained it. Then there was that little matter of Richard's disappearance at the time of the fire. What did Stelfox know? Bradfield, who had mistrusted the man for some time, but who had doubted the advisability of trying to "square" him, now wished that he had done so. However, it was too late to spend the time in regrets, and Mr. Bradfield went straight back to his study, and drawing down the blinds and locking the doors, proceeded to unlock a safe which had been built into the wall in one corner of the room.

As he took out, from some tin boxes inside, several bundles of papers, he smiled to himself with considerable malicious satisfaction. He took the papers to his desk, brought from a cupboard a strong leather travelling-bag, and with just a loving glance at the papers, which showed that he was too familiar with their exact contents to do more, he thrust them into the bottom of the bag, which he then carefully locked, putting the key in his pocket.

While enjoying to the full the pleasures of his quiet country life, and of his beautiful mansion, the astute Northerner had never lost sight of the fact that he might not be able to enjoy them for ever. He had therefore made a provision against discovery, by opening an account, to the extent of some thousands in each case, with several banks on the Continent, and in that Paradise of unrepentant thieves, South America. As long, therefore, as he could keep out of the hands of the police, it would go hard with him if he found himself without the sinews of war. The papers in the precious bag, which for the last few weeks he had kept always near at hand, consisted

of securities easily realisable, and of the means of establishing his identity with the person who had opened the banking accounts above mentioned.

With the bag in his hand, John Bradfield unlocked and opened his study door softly, looked out, and listened. The person he most feared was Stelfox, in whom he recognised a mind as astute as his own; and he had a strong suspicion, in spite of the footman's assurance to the contrary, that Stelfox had, within the last hour, secretly entered the house. John Bradfield felt that he must not only escape, but that he must escape without Stelfox's knowledge.

He went softly upstairs, the thick carpets altogether deadening the sound of his footsteps, reached his bedroom, and packed in a Gladstone bag such things as were strictly necessary for a sudden journey—a change of clothes, some linen, the book he was reading. He was also careful to put in his favourite opera-glasses, being determined to take his journey not like a fugitive, but like a man of pleasure.

Then he left his bedroom as quietly and watchfully as he had entered it, and going to the door of Marrable's room, listened for a few moments before going downstairs. He had not stood there for half-a-dozen seconds before the expression of his face changed from one of attention to one of mingled excitement and delight.

For Marrable, whom he had locked in asleep, was now awake, and talking—talking in his wandering and foolish manner, but with unusual emphasis and excitement.

And the answering voice was Stelfox's.

Here was a bit of luck indeed. The cunning Stelfox had found his way to the very person who could

give him all the information he wanted, and was now doubtless in the act of extracting it from his talkative companion. And when he unlocked the door of Marrable's room, and went in, he had left the key outside.

Mr. Bradfield softly turned the key in the lock. Then, going quickly to his workshop, which was only a few yards away, he returned with a pair of nippers, and mounting on a chair, he neatly snipped the bell-wire in two.

"Now," said he to himself, "when they find they're locked in, they will ring the bell, and nobody will come. And that door will stand a good many kicks."

He looked at his watch as he ran quickly downstairs, and slipped out of the house without meeting anybody.

"I can get a cab at the stand," thought he. "I shall just have time to catch the train. I shall book to London, but I shall get out at Ashford, and go to Queensboro', and on to Flushing. That's just the last thing I should be expected to do. So that if Stelfox has been fool enough to chum up with the police on his lunatic's behalf, I can give them leg-bail easily."

CHAPTER XXXV.

STELFOX IS RETICENT NO LONGER.

MR. BRADFIELD awoke, on the morning after his abrupt departure from Wyngnam, with a start of surprise at finding himself in a strange place.

He had been troubled by no pangs of a guilty conscience, not even by fears of an imaginary pursuer. Accusations might be made against him certainly, some of which could be supported by evidence which might weigh heavily with a judge and jury. But the real foundation of his misdeeds was one so astounding, requiring so much digging and delving before a good case could be made out, that he might have remained securely at Wyngnam for months to come, might almost indeed have defied Dick and the law to do their worst, if it had not been for Stelfox.

What Stelfox knew his late master was not quite sure; but the man's respectful reticence during long years, during which his suspicions of foul play had grown into certainties, had so strongly impressed the master, that Mr. Bradfield had never felt safe since Stelfox had left his service.

So that Mr. Bradfield, for whom Wyngnam House and its treasures had lost the charm of novelty, had thought it safest, as well as pleasantest, to decamp, leaving only the bare bones of his stolen property to be wrangled over in litigation.

What had woke him he did not know. He seemed to have jumped from the deepest, sweetest slumber

into broad wakefulness. He looked out at the sky, which he could just see between the white dimity curtains of the window, and he saw a bright little line of light which showed him that the summer sun was already high in the heavens. He looked at the foot of the bed, and saw, instead of the brass and beaten iron-work of his own magnificent bedstead, the polished mahogany of the old-fashioned four-poster. Then he remembered where he was, heaved a sigh of satisfaction at having left the anxieties of Wyngham behind him, and turned over in bed for another doze.

Then he saw what it was that had woke him. Standing beside his bedside, as respectfully as ever, was Stelfox. Then Mr. Bradfield felt that the way of the transgressor is indeed hard. He sat up in bed, and tried to look merely surprised.

"Hallo, Stelfox, is that you?" he said, boisterously.

"Yes, sir, it is I," answered Stelfox, who was always correct.

"Well, and what are you doing here? Nothing happened, I hope?"

He was not yet quite warmed to the world and its doings, so, although he was undoubtedly annoyed and alarmed by the appearance of his late servant, he did not quite appreciate the full significance of this singular intrusion.

"Well, sir, I can't exactly say that nothing has happened," said Stelfox, still looking down. "I came down from London to Wyngham yesterday afternoon, sir, to see you. But I saw Mr. Marrable instead, sir."

All this was said quite simply. But when his speech was finished, Stelfox came to a sudden stop—a nasty, significant stop.

"Mr. Marrable! Oh, yes," said Mr. Bradfield, assuming more cheerfulness of speech as his thoughts lost it.

"He told me, sir, about the will made by Mr. Gilbert Wryde."

"Well, what has that to do with me?"

"Well, sir, it has a good deal to do with you now that Mr. Richard is of age and proved to be sane, I think. For, of course, he ought to come into his property."

There was a pause. For the thousand and first time Mr. Bradfield was asking himself whether this was a man to be bribed. He decided that at this stage of affairs the experiment must be tried.

"Look here, Stelfox," said he, "you're an honest man, and you want to see justice done to everybody, I'm sure."

"I do, sir," said Stelfox, modestly.

"And, in consideration of the fact that I've not been a bad master to you, or an ungenerous one for ten years, you would like, I am sure, to see justice done to me, too?"

"I should, sir," answered Stelfox readily, but in a manner which left Mr. Bradfield to doubt whether the inflection of his voice was not "nasty."

"Well, then," pursued Mr. Bradfield, "see. Mr. Wryde, Master Richard's father, left me a large sum—you see I don't deny it was a large sum—in trust for his idiot son."

But here Stelfox at last looked up.

"*Idiot* son, sir!" he interrupted, promptly. "But Mr. Marrable assures me that, so far from being an idiot, Master Richard was considered a very bright child, even after the scarlet fever had made him deaf."

"Mr. Marrable assures you! But what's Mr. Marrable? An idiot himself!" interrupted Mr. Bradfield, impatiently.

"And," went on Stelfox, steadily, not heeding the interruption, "he says he knows it was old Mr. Wryde's intention to take or send his little son to England, as it was thought his hearing could be restored. Indeed, sir," pursued he, with uncanny smoothness, "Mr. Richard has recovered his hearing in a wonderful manner since he has been in London, and under the care of a specialist, sir."

Here Mr. Bradfield broke out with sudden sharpness:

"Oh, oh! so he's been with you in London, has he?"

His tone was by this time so frankly inimical, that Stelfox answered boldly:

"Why, yes, sir; it was natural for him to stay with the only friend he had."

"Then you helped him to get away, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, after I discovered the drugged wine. I've kept it, sir; kept the decanters just as they were left that night. I thought they might be wanted, perhaps, especially after the fire, sir."

This was frankness indeed. Mr. Bradfield changed colour.

"Do you mean to insinuate that I wanted to make away with the fellow?" he asked, abruptly.

"I only mean, sir, that I thought what I could prove about the decanters that night, and what Miss Abercarne could prove about having seen you come out of the east wing just before the fire, and what Mr. Marrable could prove about old Mr. Wryde's intentions, and what the will itself could prove about the way

you carried them out—I thought, I say, sir, that all these things together might form a very good case, and that with a clever lawyer at his back he might hope to recover his property.”

As each fresh charge was mentioned, John Bradfield's frown grew deeper, and the lines about his mouth grew harder and more unyielding. At the end he turned his head, and sought the man's eye steadily. And the man at last looked steadily at him.

“And what, if it is not too straightforward a question, what share were you to have in the final distribution?”

“Well, sir,” answered the man straightforwardly, and in exactly the same tone as before, “I may say that I expected not to be forgotten.”

“Ah, ah!” chuckled Mr. Bradfield, triumphantly. “I thought not. Now we're coming to it. Now I'm going abroad, as you see. I don't admit the truth of a single one of these accusations, not a single one, mind. But I see you could make out a very plausible tale, for you're a clever fellow, Stelfox, and I see I could be worried to death and half ruined besides, before the thing was settled. So look here: tell me what you want to keep your d——d mouth shut?”

Stelfox went on quite placidly, as if the manner in which the command was given had been rather flattering than otherwise:

“I want you, sir, to do the right thing by Master Richard. I am sure, sir, begging your pardon for having to say such a thing, that he will not be too particular in the matter of looking into past accounts.”

But Mr. Bradfield's not too sweet temper had been rising, and at these words he gave it vent.

"D——n your impudence!" roared he, glaring at the man with so much ferocity that even the calm Stelfox moved a step nearer to the foot of the bed. "Do you think I'm going to be mastered by you, or that escaped whelp? No. D——n you both for a couple of accomplices who want to rob me. You can go to the d——l both of you, and I'll be d——d if either of you shall get a penny out of me. Get out of my sight, or I'll have the landlord prosecuted for allowing you to come in!"

Rather to his surprise, Stelfox withdrew at once in exactly the same manner as if he had only come in to bring the gentleman's shaving-water. Mr. Bradfield, breathing heavily from rage and excitement, got up, turned the key in the lock, and began to dress.

He was in a passion still, so indignant with Stelfox for refusing to be bribed that he quite felt that he was an injured person. He told himself, however, with a chuckle, when he had got a little cooler, that neither Stelfox nor anybody else could prevent his crossing to Flushing by the next boat, and getting out of jurisdiction before matters had got far enough for a warrant to be issued for him. At the same time there was just a little undercurrent of anxiety in his mind, the result of the extreme promptitude with which the cunning Stelfox had traced him out, and the astuteness with which he had framed an excuse to induce the attendants at the hotel to show him up to the room of the gentleman he asked for.

"But how on earth did he get in?" Mr. Bradfield himself, remembering that he had locked his door before going to bed. On examination, however, the

lock proved to have been defective, so that Stelfox had found his entry easy.

By this time Mr. Bradfield was fully dressed, and he turned to the head of the bed where, under the damask curtain, he had hidden his precious bag of securities on the previous night.

The bag was no longer there.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VICTORY.

STUPEFACTION, terrible, absolute, fell for one moment upon Mr. Bradfield. He thought not of common thieves; it was borne in upon him at once, with irresistible force, that the theft was the work of Stelfox. Ringing the bell violently, and not waiting for it to be answered, he ran downstairs, telling the waiters, the boots, and everyone he met to "Stop that man!"

At first they did not take in the sense of this injunction, but when they did, they explained that the man, who had represented himself to be Mr. Bradfield's servant, had just caught the train back to Wyngnam. For it appeared that Stelfox had made no secret either of his own name, or of his master's, or of his destination.

"My bag! My b—b—bag," stammered Mr. Bradfield. "He's a thief! he's stolen it."

At once a little group collected round the excited man, and the proprietor of the hotel coming forward, at once ordered the boots to run to the station and telegraph a description of the man, so that he might

be stopped. For, indeed, more than one person remembered that he had gone upstairs without a bag, and returned carrying one.

But this order was scarcely given when Mr. Bradfield, turning suddenly more ghastly white than before, changed his mind and his tactics.

"No, no," stammered he. "Don't do that ; wait a bit."

At the same moment, a maid came running out of the bar with a note, which, she said, had been left for the gentleman by the man who called himself his servant.

Mr. Bradfield, opening the envelope with clammy fingers, read the following words :

"SIR,—I beg respectfully to say that I have taken your bag back to Wyngnam House for you, as I am sure that you will want it when you return, as I hope you will do in the course of the day. I can undertake to say that a satisfactory settlement will be arrived at, if you should think proper to meet Mr. Richard Wryde and his lawyer, who will be there to meet you. —I am, sir, your obedient servant,

"JAMES STELFOX."

Mr. Bradfield's head swam. The events, which he had been leading so beautifully up to this moment, had turned upon him, overwhelmed him, and were now carrying him away in their rush. A few moments' reflection convinced him that he must now go with the tide.

While still looking at the note he recovered himself, and explaining hurriedly that he had made a mistake, and that it was all right, he paid his bill, walked to

the station, and inquired the time of the next train to Wyngham.

Mr. Bradfield had been beaten at his own game of "bluff." For undoubtedly, as he had said to Stelfox, the case against him, strong though it was, would have taken time and money in abundance to prove. In the meanwhile, if he had not lost nerve at the last, he could have turned the tables on Stelfox by accusing that astute person of stealing his bag.

But the contents of that bag were so incriminating, that he decided that any arrangement would now be better than coming into court.

It was rather startling, however, for the poor man to find, on alighting at Wyngham Station, the persistent and wily Stelfox waiting on the platform to meet him. Of course, the new master saluted the old master as respectfully as ever.

"I thought you would be coming by this train, sir," said he, "so I took the liberty of telling Williams to bring the phaeton round. It's waiting outside, sir."

Mr. Bradfield was not grateful for this attention. He nodded, strode sullenly through the station, and drove home at a rapid pace. He wanted to get the whole business over as speedily as possible. Stelfox followed in a cab.

Wyngham House looked curiously different in his eyes from the mansion he had left, as he then supposed, for ever, on the previous night. And yet nothing about it was changed; it was the eye which looked upon it which had undergone a transformation. The footman who let him in knew something, perhaps, but he was careful to look as if he did not, this being an art in which all well-bred servants are proficient.

But the man's first words sent a shudder down John Bradfield's back.

"Mr. Wryde is in the drawing-room, sir."

The change of name spoke volumes to begin with. "Mr. Richard" was now "Mr. Wryde."

John went straight to the drawing-room, and walked in with a sullen face. His day was over, but he could "die game." He found not only his late ward, but Mrs. Abercarne, her daughter, and a gentleman of unmistakably legal aspect. There was a little flutter on his entrance, but he at once perceived matters were to be made as pleasant for him as the circumstances allowed. Thus, Richard came forward, and although he did not shake hands with him, he introduced Mr. Reynolds, "of the firm of Reynolds and Parkinson," in a tone less cold, less hostile than that he had assumed on the preceding day.

And yet in the meantime Richard had become aware, through Marrable, who, on the announcement of Bradfield's arrival, had tried to hide himself behind the window-curtains, of the monstrous breach of trust by which John Bradfield the pauper had become John Bradfield the millionaire, at his expense. The reason for this change in demeanour was simple enough; the human mind admires vastness, it is easily impressed, nay, abashed by undertakings carried on with magnificence, with completeness. If a man steals our watch, or a purse containing sixpence, we seize him, and hold him until a policeman comes up; if he cheats us out of a thousand pounds by inducing us to take shares in a worthless company, we proceed against him respectfully by lawsuit, which may end in our discomfiture instead of his. So that

Richard, overwhelmed by the greatness of the crime, felt almost more bewildered than indignant in the presence of the criminal.

John Bradfield had the wit to recognise this, and it cleared the way to an understanding. He proceeded to assure both the lawyer and his client that he had only held Gilbert Wryde's money in trust, and had used it in the belief that Richard was insane. Now, finding that he had been mistaken, he was delighted to hand over to the young man the fortune of which he had been trustee, and should never cease to regret the unhappy error by which Richard had been kept out of his property so long.

All this both the lawyer and his client affected to hear and believe without question, so that matters went on quite amiably and smoothly, and the transfer of the property from the usurper to the owner was quietly arranged when the ladies and Marrable, all of whom had greeted John with much constraint, had left the three gentlemen by themselves.

"May I ask, Mr. Bradfield," asked Dick, during a pause for the lawyer to make some notes of the arrangement proposed, "whether your own private fortune is large enough to enable you to live in the style you've been accustomed to? Or have you only kept up this large establishment on my account?"

He had found this delicate question somewhat difficult to frame, and he had not quite succeeded in avoiding a suspicion of sarcasm. But Mr. Bradfield answered at once that his private fortune was not adequate to stand such a strain.

"You will oblige me, then," went on Dick, with very

cold courtesy, "by arranging with Mr. Reynolds the income which you would wish to have paid to you"—he paused a little before he went on with some emphasis—"in consideration, not of your past, but of your present services."

John Bradfield winced; but he submitted like a lamb to be awarded a handsome pension in consideration of the fact that he had had to disgorge the remains of the property he had stolen.

As soon as they decently could, both Mr. Reynolds and Richard left him. When they were in the hall, lawyer and client looked at each other.

"Well," said Mr. Reynolds, as he prepared to leave the house in company with Dick, "I've met some rogues in my time, but——"

"I prefer to think," said Dick, gravely, "that he has tried so long to believe that I was insane that the forced belief has injured his own brain."

"Very kind of you to put it like that. You forgive him then?"

The answer came, short and sharp :

"No. You can't forgive the man who has robbed you of seventeen years of life, and youth, and hope. If I had forgiven him, I should not have insulted the cur by offering him a pension."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't understand the world, Mr. Wryde. Nobody minds such an insult as that."

"It's a satisfaction to me, at all events," answered Richard, simply.

But he would not have been so magnanimous if he had not known that Chris was waiting to meet him in the meadow by the barn.

Later in the day Mr. Bradfield came across Stelfox,

who was enjoying the victory he had been the means of bringing about too greatly to leave the scene of it with undue haste. His late master, who had recovered his spirits a little, addressed him, with some abruptness, in the following manner :

“ Stelfox, you’re a scoundrel.’

“ Thank you, sir,” answered the man as quietly as ever. “ If I hadn’t been a bit of a rogue myself,” he went on thoughtfully, “ perhaps, sir, I shouldn’t have been so successful in bringing another rogue to book.”

For one moment Mr. Bradfield seemed disposed to kick him, but he refrained, and laughed instead, with some constraint, however. The remark had to be treated as a joke, though it could not be made to pass for a palatable one.

“ Now, why,” pursued he, with an appearance of sincere regret, “ did you not either let me know that you believed Mr. Richard to be recovering, or else let him escape much sooner than you did ? ”

“ Well, sir,” he answered, not thinking it necessary to notice the first question, and proceeding straight to the consideration of the second, “ when I first had my suspicions, the poor young gentleman had grown into such a savage that, if I had let him out, people would have believed that he *was* insane. I had to do my best to fit him for the world before I let him out into it. And I shouldn’t have succeeded so well as I did but for Miss Abercarne’s coming. That gave him just the stimulus he wanted, and after that it was easy to do what I liked with him. Why, sir, he’d forgotten how to speak when I first took him in hand, and I had to teach him as well as I could by the movement of the lips first, until bit by bit it came back to him.”

John Bradfield whistled softly.

"Then I d——d well wish you'd left it alone!" he murmured softly, as he walked away.

There was consternation among the Graham-Shutes when the evil rumour reached their ears that "dear cousin John" had got into trouble of some sort which involved heavy pecuniary loss, and the breaking up the establishment at Wyngnam House. It came at such an awkward moment, too, just when Mrs. Graham-Shute had contemplated borrowing the use of the grounds for a garden-party which was to break the record of all her previous entertainments.

So, in despair, she had to borrow the common garden in one of the little squares in the town to give an open-air reception, which, at least, had the merit of attracting a great deal of attention. It was, indeed, the "sensation of the season" among the little boys and girls and the fisher-lads and hawkers of the population, who assembled in crowds, climbing up the railings from the outside, and occasionally shying well-directed pebbles right into the strawberries and cream which the guests were enjoying as well as they could in the circumstances. So that Mrs. Graham-Shute's usual neglect to provide sufficient amusement for her guests was amply compensated for by the necessity of perpetual rushes on the part of the gentlemen of the party to the railings, to disperse the jibing hordes from the courts and alleys of the town.

One other incident gave an unusual zest to the proceedings; this was the appearance of Chris Abercarne, no longer in the character of the "house-keeper's little girl," but as the *fiancée* of a gentleman of property who now made his first appearance in Wyngnam society as "Mr. Bradfield's ward."

Dick's appearance threw Lilith into a state of the greatest excitement.

"Why, Chris," she took the earliest opportunity of whispering to Miss Abercarne, "it's my handsome stranger! How awfully, *awfully* mean of you not to tell me! I've been wasting my time dreaming about him for the last six months!"

But other things less pleasant to hear were said about the young fellow with the prematurely grey hair, and the deep lines of sadness in his face. People whispered of "a far-away look in his eyes," and asked each other what the story was about the man who had been shut up in the east wing at Wyngnam House. And they wondered why Mr. Bradfield had left so suddenly for the Continent, and whether it was true that Wyngnam House was to be sold.

But none of these rumours troubled Chris or her future husband, whose scarcely concealed worship of each other caused many a kindly smile. Chris was quite astonished at the number of friends she had, as the quality and quantity of wedding presents that poured in proved, for everybody's opinion of the perfect fool had gone up when everybody heard that she was going to marry a man with thirty thousand a year.

A much smarter wedding than that of Richard Wryde and Chris Abercarne took place about the same time as theirs. It was that of James Stelfox with a young woman to whom he had long been attached, and who was enabled, through the generosity of Richard, to indulge her heart's highest ambition, and to be married in a white satin train six yards long, with a veil of corresponding proportions. She had eight bridesmaids, who all wore

mauve satin frocks and primrose-coloured hats, and the portrait of the bride and an account of the ceremony appeared in *The Woman's World of Fashion*.

Richard Wryde had set his late servant up as the proprietor of a brand-new hotel, for he persisted in being passionately grateful to the man who had been the means of saving his reason and his life, in spite of Stelfox's own gentle remonstrances.

"If you'll only believe me, sir," he would say earnestly, "it was just a toss up whether I took your part or Mr. Bradfield's. For you were that savage when it first occurred to me to take you in hand, that I didn't know how it would turn out myself. It was just a lucky 'spec' on my part, sir."

But Dick will not believe this, neither will Chris. They are both rather old-fashioned, unworldly creatures, tinged with a simplicity which comes to him through his long confinement, and to her through sympathy with him, and they are a little out of touch with the cynical spirit of the times.

They live quietly in the lake district, for Richard Wryde, through his long deafness, cannot bear a louder noise than that of his wife singing or playing the piano, or the splash of the water of the lake, or the cries of their children at play.

THE END.



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